



WRITTEN BY
Sorahoshi
ILLUSTRATED BY
Yuki Kinami

Past Life Countess, Present Life OTOME GAME NPC?!

Table of Contents

[Copyright](#)

[Colored Image 1](#)

[Character Page](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1: The Lady Born a Commoner](#)

[Chapter 2: The Lady Plays the Otome Game](#)

[Chapter 3: The Lady Takes the Challenge](#)

[Chapter 4: The Lady and the White Roses](#)

[Chapter 5: The Lady and the Horse](#)

[Chapter 6: The Lady Who Couldn't Dance](#)

[Chapter 7: The Lady Has a Meeting](#)

[Chapter 8: The Lady Bewildered](#)

[Chapter 9: The Lady Dances](#)

[Chapter 10: The Lady Wavers](#)

[Chapter 11: The Lady, Wooed](#)

[After Story: The Lady Becomes a Bride](#)

[Side Story: The Lady and the School Festival](#)

[Side Story: The Secrets of the Lacrofine Royal Family](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Other Series Pt. 1](#)

[Other Series Pt. 2](#)

Past Life Countess, Present Life Otome Game NPC?!
Sorahoshi

Translation by Amber Tamosaitis

Illustration by Yuki Kinami

Title Design by Elisabet Lopez Pons

Editing by Nicole Brugger-Dethmers

Proofreading by Charis Messier

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Past Life Countess, Present Life Otome Game NPC?!
© 2018 by Sorahoshi

English translation rights reserved by
Cross Infinite World.

English translation ©2020 Cross Infinite World

All rights reserved. In accordance with U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, email the publisher, addressed "Attention: Permissions Coordinator," at the email below.

Cross Infinite World
contact@crossinfworld.com
www.crossinfworld.com

Published in the United States of America

Visit us at www.crossinfworld.com

[Facebook.com/crossinfworld](https://www.facebook.com/crossinfworld)

[Twitter.com/crossinfworld](https://twitter.com/crossinfworld)

crossinfinitemworld.tumblr.com

First Digital Edition: September 2020

ISBN-13: 978-1-945341-47-2







Stay up to date On Light Novels by Downloading our mobile App

[Zerobooks Android](#)

[Zerobooks IOS](#)

Download all your Favorite Light Novels

[Jnovels.com](#)

Prologue

MY name was Annerosa Ortegamo. I was born the eldest daughter of a count and given a rigorous education in the ways a noblewoman should conduct herself.

My father was Count Ortegamo of the Kingdom of Lacrofine, and my mother, the daughter of another count from the same kingdom. She held a deep sense of pride in that noble upbringing. With my younger brother having a personality pompous enough to rival my father's, and my younger sister the spitting image of my mother in bearing and deed, my mother reveled in the fact that she had produced suitable descendants for the family line.

However, it was all a lie. There was no vast fortune such as one would expect to accompany the name of a family as illustrious as the Ortegamos. For many years, the land that composed our domain withered under the auspices of bad weather, and thus so, too, did our family coffers.

One would think such meager assets would lead our family to pursue a modest existence, but the nobility was not known for its frugality. One could not be expected to look the part of a noble without spending like one.

In particular, the pink dress with the ostentatious ribbon my mother chose for me was not to my liking. It was, however, to the liking of the second prince.

My mother informed me that the embroidery adorning the hem of my dress was the latest fashion, but when I asked her if the beads were not a tad unnecessary, she merely brushed me aside.

"They are just right for the future wife of the second prince."

"That will never be me, Mother," I insisted.

But no matter how vigorously I objected, my words had no impact upon her.

All my efforts to convince her that I wanted a simple life were for naught. The only thing I could do was suppress my tears and touch my hair, which had been carefully prepared for the evening's festivities.

Torn between the life I led and the wishes in my heart, I, Annerosa Ortegamó, found myself thinking, *Oh, to be a commoner!*

Chapter 1: The Lady Born a Commoner

“OH no...is it really this late?!”

I knew I had to hurry up and finish getting ready, yet I couldn't help stopping in front of the mirror to check my new school uniform one last time.

That beige jacket with brown stripes over the dress uniform was indeed very cute. I would have preferred the skirt to be ankle length, but my mother said I would have looked like a *sukeban* delinquent. I had no idea what a *sukeban* was, but I was able to infer it meant that an ankle-length uniform was out of the question. Therefore, if my legs had to be on display, I opted for thick tights to cover them as best I could. I suppose it was only natural I would feel a lingering aversion to letting my legs show.

I completed my look by braiding my hair at the sides and joining it at the back.

“Morning, Big Sis!”

“Good morning, Kirara. You're up early.”

“...Mornin'.”

“Good morning, Haruto. You, on the other hand, are taking your time. No morning practice?”

“Well, you have your entrance ceremony today. I thought we'd get a picture together, so I got up and got ready.”

My little sister's mischievous smile told me Haruto had been waiting for me. That grin of hers was entirely too cute.

Haruto, however, had become moody as of late. He shouted “Shut up!” and looked as if he might quarrel with Kirara, so I stepped in between them.

“Thank you. Shall we go ahead and take that picture, then?”

I put my arms around both of them. Kirara rested her head on my chest, while Haruto continued to fidget.

Ah, my siblings are entirely too adorable.

As soon as we finished taking photos with each of their smartphones, my father poked his head into the dining room, tying his tie.

"Good morning, Father."

"Good morning, Urara. You have your entrance ceremony today, don't you? Congratulations!"

"Thank you."

Returning his smile, I poured some black tea.

"It's such a nice day. It seems a shame to waste it heading off to some boring tech conference. Maybe I should just come to your ceremony instead."

"Oh, I'll be fine on my own. I'm a high schooler now."

"Aw, but..."

"Besides, I would prefer you go to Kirara's middle school entrance ceremony tomorrow."

"...Yes, ma'am."

I made my objection clear. Mother was working a part-time job as well and would only be able to get tomorrow off, so I wanted them to focus on Kirara. She was only twelve, after all. I merely wished my father could manage to keep track of her important events.

With that, I finished my tea in a timely manner and stood up.

"Well, I'll be off, then."

"See you later. And remember, be careful of, well, everything."

"Later! Go get 'em, Big Sis!"

"Take care!"

I opened the front door and gazed up at the clear blue sky. It was the sort of weather heralding new beginnings. Time to go.

I stepped forth into the spring of my fifteenth year in a life completely different from the one I lived in Lacrofine.

I, Urara Tendou, was a bona fide, born and raised commoner.

My father was the materials manager for a medium-sized company.

My mother was a saleswoman at a dirt-cheap auto-parts store. She had started part-time, but her hours were increasing lately.

And my surly younger brother and cheeky little sister were just the sort you might expect to find rounding out any family of five.

We lived a modest life of modest means, as one might expect of a family living the tight budgetary constraints of a family our size, and yet we were happy. We were a normal family. An exceedingly normal, everyday family. The most common of commoners.

But the truth was, I was, in even the slightest of ways, just scarcely removed from being a true commoner.

“Whew...”

On the bus bound for the entrance ceremony, I heaved a gentle sigh.

I furtively glanced around, hoping no one else had heard me. A boy around my age quickly looked away.

Oh dear. How embarrassing. I should have been more careful.

I gazed out the window, pretending as if nothing happened.

For the first time in a long while, I thought back on my past life in Lacrofine.

I realized how naïve I was back then.

It would have been unthinkable for a noble family like ours to not be able to buy what we wanted, to not have the money for it. I had no concept of living like the other half. No, perhaps I did, but it was so hard for me to fathom, I merely turned a blind eye to people who lived that way.

And yet, from the confines of my carriage, I yearned to live as they did, free of anxiety over court rank and status.

They bustled about, chatting cheerily and laughing. I wished for an existence like theirs.

So this life truly was a dream come true for me.

Being a commoner really is the best!

Naturally, the world I inhabit now is entirely different from the one I lived in before. When I realized this, I vigorously studied the history and geography of my new world. A world, it turns out, where a country by the name of Lacrofine never existed.

The general feel of Lacrofine was most similar to that of Europe during the Middle Ages, but because of the existence of tools and animals unknown here, I realized this was likely another world entirely.

Even more incredible was the fact that technology seemed to have progressed here much further than it had back home.

Water flowed freely with the turn of a tap. Heat no longer required starting a fire, and light was easy to come by. You could readily find ice in summer and warmth in winter.

Ah, it was like living in a fantasy. Even a queen couldn't expect such luxury back home.

Ladies were not expected to adhere to strict rules of etiquette. No more being struck with a fan if I made a mistake. No more being scolded for laughing without covering my mouth.

I could say it over and over again. *Being a commoner is the best!* I grinned without intending to.

At fifteen, I was heading off to school, whereas someone in my previous life would be about to make their societal debut at this age, hoping to marry someone of higher status.

Last night, I was so excited about my first day that I couldn't sleep. Ah, but it would all work out. I couldn't wait to see what adventure the day would bring.

The bus driver called the next stop.

And so, full of all the hopes and dreams of any modern fifteen-year-old, I stepped off the bus.

(((

ST. DELIA'S Academy, the school I would be starting at, was built to support the education of the sons and daughters of wealthy families from preschool through university. Because of that, it cost a lot to attend the academy, but as a scholarship student, I was able to go for free.

Free.

It certainly did make me feel special, as if this were the reward for all my efforts.

I arrived at the school gates, my heart welling up with excitement at all the fun I was sure to have this year...but something was amiss.

No, it wasn't just something. It was the odd girl standing off to the side who was clearly out of place. The girl trying yet failing to hide in the shadows of the main gate, whose soft brown hair was pulled into loose pigtails. Her brown eyes darted frantically about.

I believe the phrase my mother would have used to describe the look on her face would've been "glaring daggers."

She would scrutinize each passerby with an air of superiority, determine they weren't her target with a "Hmph," and shift her eyes to the next potential target.

An overwhelming number of families were attending the entrance ceremony, and they all kept their distance, none of them seeming to want to go near her.

It was clear to me, too, that she was best avoided, and so I attempted to slip carefully by.

Carefully...

"Hey! You there!"

"Eek!"

Someone grabbed me by the shoulder.

Wh-What?

She narrowed her eyes and brought her face near mine. Close up, she was a pretty girl, save for that sour look.

Please get away from me. I'm sorry. I've done nothing wrong, but nevertheless, I'll apologize.

"Where are you from?"

"Huh?"

"I asked you where you come from."

"O-Oh. I'm from Ikemen-cho. It's about thirty minutes from here by bus..."

"I didn't ask where you lived. I asked what house you are from. Your family name, what is it?"

Whoa, she really is scary... More and more wrinkles appeared in her brow.

"...I'm Urara Tendou."

"Tendou? ...I've never heard that name before. Perhaps it has its roots in a more reputable family... These days, you can't be too careful. All sorts of riffraff wander in here."

She had begun muttering to herself, so I took the opportunity to make my escape.

"So, who is your father?"

She grabbed my shoulder once more.

"Excuse me. I'm just a commoner. I'm terribly sorry."

I've apologized enough already; please let me be.

I bowed my head, but when I looked back at her, she was staring me down. What was I to do?

"You couldn't possibly be a commoner and go here!"

"Oh, but I...I am. The most common girl you could ever imagine."

"What? Not with that hoity-toity walk you're not!"

Thanks to my upbringing in my past life, I had excellent posture, but I was also reverting to my training in this time of crisis.

"And your eyes and hair are naturally brown!"

On closer inspection, her hair was dyed. Her roots were black. And...was she wearing contacts? Surely that was against school rules.

"What are you trying to pull?"

Pull?

Her anger showed no signs of abating, so I attempted to reason with her.

"Please calm down. I really am just a nameless commoner. My status is nothing compared with a rich girl like yourself. I won't bother you any further. I promise."

She grumbled but did finally seem to be calming down.

"You really will stay away from me?"

"I will."

I didn't *want* to go near her, not after all this.

"You won't get in my way?"

"I absolutely will not."

I really didn't want to.

"Good."

Ahh...at last. It seemed she finally understood. As I tried to take my leave of her, she called out after me, as if to deliver one final blow.

"But what would a commoner be doing at a school like ours?"

"Oh, I'm here on a scholarship."

"Ah, so you're a bookworm, then! Good for you!"

She was so rude... It seemed evident I had become involved with a particularly obnoxious rich girl.

How was I going to get away from her without any more trouble? Despite my social graces honed in my days as a count's daughter, I was struggling to think of an unobtrusive exit. She was still standing there, making a sound that was not all that dissimilar from a growl.

Just then, we heard a great commotion from beyond the school gate.

I turned back to see a resplendent group of people walking in.

At the head of the group was a boy with intense eyes, a shapely high nose, and lips pursed with intent. The swagger in his walk would make anyone take notice. And yet the way he walked as if this level of attention were nothing out of the ordinary made me realize he was a particular sort of person.

Next to him walked a boy wearing thin, silver-rimmed glasses that suited the erudite air he gave off. His appearance was impeccable, clearly planned to give him the air of the perfect gentleman. His black eyes resting just behind the glasses had a deep, peaceful look about them, reminiscent of a hidden forest pond.

In stark contrast to him was a brunette with his uniform slightly askew, his nimble body moving like a cheetah ready to pounce. Despite his appearance, he greeted the shrieks from the girls around him with a single gentle smile, hinting at a warmth just beneath the surface.

Walking a step behind was a boy whose navy necktie suggested he was a third-year. From his slicked-back bangs and hair falling down his back to his pale, discerning eyes, he maintained a mature, collected demeanor in spite of all the attention.

The boy chatting away next to him looked like an idol with his baby face and fluffy hair. His eyes and lips were rounded, giving him a cherubic appearance, and his bordeaux-red necktie indicated he was a first-year, just as I was.

The features of the boys were clearly refined, but so, too, was the way they walked. They were clearly the cream of the crop, even among this school filled with the children of affluent families.

Watching them reminded me of my past life. That magnanimity is much like that of the royal family and the high-ranked nobles who flocked around them. Commoners moved aside for them. No one dare look at them, as if doing so would cause their eyes to burn.

Just as I was about to take a quick step back, I realized that oddball girl still had me by the shoulders.

“Kyaa!”

“Wah! Ah!”

Why is she suddenly diving straight into that radiant group?! Whatever the reason, she is being too obvious. Also, please don't drag me along with you!

Why did this have to happen, today of all days? I toppled forward with her. Closing my eyes, I braced for the impact, but despite the harsh crushing sound, I was met instead by something soft.

I didn't fall. My shoulders were being held up by beautiful, slender fingers. My eyes landed on the face of a gorgeous female student at my side.

“Are you all right?”

“Oh, yes...thank you very much.”

The girl standing at the center of these boys, as if being protected, had rushed forward to catch me and save me from falling. Gazing at her, I saw her jet-black eyes were framed with lovely long lashes. Her smooth, almost porcelain face was perfectly framed by long black hair. The way the light reflected off her shimmering hair made her look like she had a halo. She was stunning, without question. Even the air around her seemed to sparkle.

Did smoke normally accompany the appearance of such beautiful people? No, that was just clouds of dirt. Just as I began to understand my situation, someone grabbed my ankle.



“Hey—!!”

“—!!”

It was that girl, covered in sand after the dive she had taken.

“Why won’t any of you help *meee*?”

That wasn’t going to happen.

To those popular students, it was unfathomable. Why would she think they would stoop to help her? Even now, the one in the front, the so-called Prince, was recoiling. He wrinkled his nose in disgust at her. And the one with glasses was adjusting them, trying to maintain an air of calm. The other three were trying to suppress their laughter. No, one of them had already given in and was laughing uproariously.

Honestly, what was I supposed to do? The entrance ceremony was about to begin, and I desperately wanted to move on with my day. But this girl still had a hold on my ankle.

Just as I was seeking a way out of this predicament, an adult, likely a teacher, came rushing over to us.

“Teacher, over here!”

“Oh, that looks awful! Are you new? Are you all right?”

“Yes...”

The teacher helped the girl up and looked her over, then added insult to injury.

“Color contacts and dyed hair? You’re racking up demerits right out the gate for breaking school rules. Off to the nurse’s, then the guidance office with you!”

Just as I started to feel sorry for her for being dragged off by a teacher and having to miss the entrance ceremony, she started shouting things like “The event!” and “My affection stats!” So I didn’t feel too sorry for her.

At least now, I could finally hurry to the entrance ceremony.

Before leaving, I thought I should offer my gratitude once more. I looked over to see that beautiful girl giving me a gentle smile.

"Thank you very much."

"No, it must have been truly a distressing situation for you."

"...Yes, to be honest, I'm still not entirely sure what that was all about."

We shared a giggle.

"My name is Chouko Tsukuyomi. Might I ask yours?"

"I am Urara Tendou."

"Nice to meet you, Urara."

After a slight bow, I watched as she seamlessly eased back into the midst of the five sparkling men, turning them into the Sparkling Six right before my eyes. I scurried off toward the assembly hall before their resplendence blinded me.

(((

"OH, so you're this year's freshman representative?"

The boy seated next to me began speaking before the ceremony started. I turned to see one of the Sparkling Six smiling at me. With his slicked-back hair and mature aura, he seemed to exude a suave intensity not seen in students our age.

"Yes. Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Urara Tendou."

"I see. You're the scholarship recipient this year, aren't you, Tendou? Congratulations on being admitted."

"Thank you very much."

"I am Sakutarou Shinmyou. I'm a third-year, and since they've made me student council president, please don't hesitate to let me know if you run into any trouble."

I heard him holding back a laugh. He was likely remembering what happened earlier.

I already ran into trouble. Can I bring that up without hesitation? I wondered, returning my focus to the ceremony.

A voice filled the room, introducing me as the representative for new students. Seeing the large crowd before me from so high up made me anxious. My mother would have looked at it like “All eyes on me, peasants,” but in my eyes, everyone sparkled, like treasure. They really were well-off, a stark contrast to a commoner like me.

Among them, the one who shone the brightest was Chouko Tsukuyomi herself, clearly born to be a princess.

I felt it earlier as well, but she really was beautiful. Not just in appearance, but even her mannerisms displayed a tutored elegance. She was glamorous, but not obtrusively so. Her appearance was subtly entrancing, like a moon goddess. When our eyes met, she gave me a small wave and a gentle smile.

Seeing her made my heart skip a beat and made me forget I was onstage. She truly was mesmerizing.

The entrance ceremony ended without incident and we moved on to our individual class orientations.

The halls were aflutter with joyous chatter. Many of the students here were admitted in preschool, so they knew one another since they were old enough to attend. I hoped in the coming days I, too, could make a friend. Anticipation for my new school life built as I opened the door to the classroom. The room fell silent at my entrance.

Wait, what’s going on?

Could it be because they don’t think I belong here? Is this their way of letting me know? I certainly hope not. No other high school had a generous scholarship program like this. There was nowhere else I could hope to attend for free. I needed them to accept me. My only option was to greet them with a smile—gracefully, courteously. I would need the composure I learned from my past life’s etiquette training.

“Good day.”

That moment of silence shattered into a great commotion. Oh no, I messed up!

I was trying to decide what I should do now when a hand clasped my shoulder.

"Hey, why are you standing in the doorway? Oh, didn't I see you earlier?"

"Oh..."

It was one of the Sparkling Six. I guess this meant we were in the same class. What a strange fate to meet once again.

"We're in the same class. It must be fate."

Oh, did he read my mind?

"We shouldn't block the door. Come on in so we can talk."

He led me to a seat by the window. The boy was rather attractive. His soft brown hair and clear eyes reminded me of an idol I'd once seen on television. His appearance caused quite an uproar. Particularly loud were the shrill voices of my female classmates.

"Thank you very much."

"Urara...Tendou, right? Our new student representative?"

"Yes. And what is your name, if I may ask?"

"I'm Oboro Shimosuru. Nice to meet'cha. I've been here since preschool, so let me know if you ever need anything."

He gave me his name with an affable smile. Well, at least I had become acquainted with one of my classmates.

"So, did something happen in front of the classroom door?"

"Ah, no, it was just that the room became quiet right before I walked in, so I was afraid that I looked out of place..."

"...No, you definitely fit in here."

"How—"

Just as I was about to ask him what he meant, a loud thud cut me off, followed by silence.

I had a bad feeling. I didn't have to turn around to know why that was. I had heard that huffing before.

Please, give me a break.

“How...could...you...steal...my...event?!”

The one person I didn’t want to see ever again. I was starting to resent my fate.

(((

AHH, black tea really is delightful.

I was enjoying a cup on the terrace of the academy’s café. Of course a school for the richest families in the nation would have its own café with delicious aromatic tea. The café had several unique varieties, and though I longed to be a repeat visitor, my wallet was far less amenable to the high price.

That was a shame...

“Well? Urara Tendou, you said you weren’t going to get in my way, right?”

It really is a shame.

Immediately after that girl had appeared in homeroom, class began. Afterward, I tried to make a hasty esc—I mean, leave, but she quickly grabbed me.

This strange girl, who introduced herself as Shizuku Aritomo, caught me off guard and insisted I come with her.

I could hear my mother telling me to be wary of being taken behind the school building, so I was glad when she suggested the café instead. There were plenty of people and she seemed to have calmed down, so I was comfortable being upfront with her.

“I don’t completely understand what’s going on, but I had no intention of getting in your way.”

She didn’t seem to believe what I said, but it was the truth.

After all, everything bad that happened to me today was connected to her.

I drained the contents of my cup under her suspicious eye. I inadvertently slammed the cup down when I was done, heavy under the weight of my racing thoughts.

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway."

She spoke with a haughty manner, but I simply ignored her.

"I still have two events left today, so I need to at least trigger one of them."

"If you say so..."

"So, Urara Tendou, I need you to stay here for exactly one hour."

I had no idea what she was talking about.

"What I mean is, don't get in the way of me triggering any other events! If you stay here, you won't be pulled into anything, so it should be fine. Got it?"

Her narrowed eyes locked on me with frightening intensity. This girl had absolutely none of the proverbial chill I would associate with such a look. It was like a kitten sizing up a lion...a strange comparison if not for her poor attempt at intimidation.

I bobbed my head up and down like a broken toy, agreeing not to get in her way. I was getting hungry, but I would remain here for another hour. What could I do for lunch?

Seemingly satisfied with my promise to remain still as a statue, Aritomo rose and summoned the waiter.

"I'll buy your lunch, so have whatever you like. I'll settle up later."

"...Thank you very much."

Well, she could be generous when she wanted.

"In exchange, do not take even one step from that seat for one hour!"

Never mind.

She gave a triumphant cackle and headed off for the courtyard. I had no idea what she was planning, but as promised, I would not interfere. I would stay put for an hour.

Something came flying...and hit Aritomo? Bull's-eye right on her head. It looked like a rugby ball.

Oh no, a muscular group of boys chasing the rugby ball slammed right into her! It looked like quite a predicament... but I had promised not to leave this spot for one hour... This was what she wanted, right?

It seemed one of the muscular boys had helped her up and was ferrying her away. I heard her cry out, but I couldn't help wondering—if that was the event she didn't want me interfering with, then surely the best thing to do was to pretend as if I hadn't seen anything. I turned my attention to the waiter and asked for another cup of tea and a sandwich instead.

Just as the waiter set my tea and sandwich on the table, a soccer ball came flying out of the schoolyard and bounced off several walls before rolling its way to my feet. My, that was close. I picked the ball up just as a boy with short light-brown hair and an energetic expression dashed over to me.

"Oh, sorry. I tried to be careful, but... Oh?"

It was the boy who had been laughing hysterically before.

Perhaps he realized the connection, too, because he was suppressing a smile. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. I stood up and handed the ball back to him without a word.

"Thanks," he said with a quick wink that suited his personality perfectly. I was suddenly aware of several girls around us letting out scandalized shrieks. A boy like him likely had plenty of fans, so it was best to be discrete. So I replied with a gentle smile and a bow.

I then returned to my seat. Just as my eyes drifted back to the table, I heard him speak again.

"...Hey, tell me your name."

"Me?"

"Yeah, you."

He pulled out the chair to my right and sat himself down. I had no idea how to respond to someone like him. But

then I remembered that my classmate Shimozuru was also a member of his group, so there was no reason to be hesitant. Though I had introduced myself as the representative for new students at the ceremony earlier today, I suppose he hadn't felt the need to learn my name.

"I am Urara Tendou, a first-year."

"Urara, huh? I remember now. I'm Ui Mikazuki. Nice to meet you, Urara."

He gave my right hand a squeeze as he said that last part. *Wow, what is this? He just grabbed my hand!* I felt a little embarrassed.

And now I couldn't bring myself to eat. What to do?

Mikazuki was smiling at me as he held my hand, and though I was famished, I couldn't bring myself to eat in front of him. Oh, why couldn't he read the room?

Just as I had resigned myself to my fate, the hand of an angel intervened.

"Ui, how long do you intend to trouble her? Leave her be."

It was the boy with the glasses. He seemed a bit introverted but had a cool look in his eyes. He seemed intelligent.

He ignored Mikazuki's friendly greeting and removed his hand from mine. *Thank you. Now I can finally have my lunch.*

I showed my gratitude with a smile, and his cheeks flushed. Oh, he was the opposite of Mikazuki. He nudged his glasses up.

"Tendou, right? I really enjoyed your speech."

"Thank you."

"Oh yeah, this is Shirazu Izayoi."

Izayoi smacked Mikazuki on the head for introducing him. In spite of their opposing personalities, they appeared to be good friends.

"Oh, I heard the rugby team had to carry off someone who got injured earlier. They had to take them to the

hospital. Heard it was yours.”

“...Just because it’s my family’s doesn’t mean I would know what’s going on.”

“It was a girl, you know.”

“What difference does that make?”

Ignoring Mikazuki’s knowing smile, Izayoi called the waiter over and placed an order. And just like that, we were dining together. Well, I suppose it was only natural, seeing as it was lunchtime and we were all hungry. I began eating my sandwich.

This is delicious. Things had become lively around me, but I decided not to pay it much heed.

“Ui, Shirazu, there you are.”

I recognized that voice and turned to see another member of the Sparkling Six and my classmate, the baby-faced Shimosuru.

“Oh, you guys were with Tendou?”

“Yes. Are you here for lunch, too, Shimosuru?”

“Yeah, I’ve been looking for you for a while and it just ended up being lunchtime. And yet here you both are, feeding your own faces. Oh, can I sit here?” he asked, pointing to a table with four chairs. The other members of the Sparkling Six were behind him.

This was all becoming quite the spectacle. I had no way of not looking at them.

The student council president waved even as I narrowed my eyes. As he did, the one with the princely air looked displeased.

“How do you all already know her? That’s unfair.”

“Urara Tendou, this is Mitsuru.”

The lovely Lady Tsukuyomi appeared and offered the introduction. Even the way she laughed was lovely.

“Oh, sorry about this morning. I’m Mitsuru Mochizuki. Nice to meet you.”

I gently accepted his hand in response. The one who should have apologized was Aritomo, not any of them. They

all seemed to be laughing about that morning, so there was nothing I could say.

They sat around the table and whiled away the lunch hour hopping from topic to topic. There was much in their discussion that was unfamiliar to a commoner like me, but I offered a smile where I could in hopes of not seeming too quiet. In my past upbringing, it was polite to sit quietly and smile, but now they tried to bring me into the conversation.

"By the way, Tendou, I understand you came from outside the academy, so were you abroad through middle school?"

"No. I attended a local public middle school. It was there that I learned about this academy's scholarship program and decided to try for it."

"Public school? Impossible, as refined as you are," Izayoi interjected.

No, I really am a commoner. I can't compare to the refined people that attend this school.

"I have never been abroad, though I do hope to go one day."

With both of my parents working and a pair of siblings, the farthest vacation our family had ever taken was to my mother's parents' home. Naturally, I didn't have a passport, either. However, I longed to see the sights of Europe, which most closely resembled the country I grew up in, in my past life. My eyes glazed over just thinking about it. A gasp brought me back to the present.

"W-Well, our school trip is supposed to be to Europe, so there's always that to look forward to," my classmate Shimosuru said.

"Is it really? I'm so glad to hear that."

I placed both hands on my cheeks and breathed a deep sigh, excited about the prospect of going abroad.

I heard someone mutter, "What is this exotic creature that's wandered into our school?" and thought perhaps they had seen an ant or something.

It is spring after all, so it's only natural. My mother already had to spray insect repellent on our plants. I let my thoughts wander as I finished my tea.

I continued to answer their questions until the requisite hour I had promised to remain for Aritomo had passed. Just as I was excusing myself, Mochizuki requested my contact information.

"Wait, you don't have a smartphone?"

"No, I use the house phone instead. I haven't needed a smartphone up to this point."

All of them looked shocked. I understood it was rare not to have one in this day and age. However, I had grown accustomed to the slow pace of letters in my previous life, so the idea of people simply being able to call upon one another whenever they wanted was a tad unsettling. There was also the fact that I was terrible with machines.

"But wouldn't you want to be able to talk to your boyfriend?" Mikazuki asked with that amiable smile of his. Mochizuki and Shimozuru both nodded in agreement. It was a little vexing.

A boyfriend? I'm sorry to disappoint, but I've never had one of those. If that's how they want to put it, then...

"I believe absence makes the heart grow fonder. Like the anticipation of awaiting the next phase of the moon." The corners of my mouth twitched upward ever so slightly as I responded.

After a moment, I could hear murmurs around me.

"Wow."

"Seriously?"

"That's one way to see it."

Had I really said something that strange? I tilted my head, and just as I did, someone pounced on me and grabbed me tight. There was a lovely fragrance accompanied by a horrid pain.

"Wah?"

"How adorable! Urara, you are simply too charming!"

I heard the angelic lilt of the elegant Chouko Tsukuyomi in my ear. What? I was in shock.

She had said so little during our lunch, merely smiling, so what was this? This sudden, passionate embrace.

“Say, we should be friends. No, I suppose I should ask first. May I call you Urara?”

“Um, I...I wouldn’t mind that.”

“Oh, wonderful. Please, call me Chouko.”

The brilliant smile on her face made it impossible for me to refuse.

I was incredibly happy, but something was just...a little strange about all this.

Shizuku Aritomo’s Monologue

WHILE I’m not really sure of all the details, shortly after I was born, my father, an up-and-coming IT entrepreneur, made it big.

Before then, our family was fairly unremarkable. More like we were living in poverty, but as my mother said, life can be mysterious sometimes. I really don’t remember a time before our current lifestyle.

All my memories are of our massive house with its spacious yard and of always being able to afford the most fashionable clothes, eat the most delicious foods, and have whatever my heart desires.

The first party my father took me to was a Christmas party when I was seven.

I should have been intimidated at the sight of the ballroom of that first-class hotel decked out in finery, the floor overflowing with women in gorgeous gowns and men in their nicest suits. Instead, it invigorated me.

It was rather ostentatious, but that didn’t bother me in the slightest. It’s true, after all. To be well-off is far better than being poor. My mother was uncomfortable and wanted

to go home. I desperately begged her to let us stay a little longer so that I could enjoy this bold new world a little longer.

And so, swept away with joy and dizzy with all the sights and sounds, I first laid eyes on them.

A group of boys around my age.

But they were special. I knew it the moment I saw them.

They were still children, just like me, and yet they were so charismatic, even the adults were taken by their charm.

Ohh, I know those boys... And in that moment, I realized the truth of this world. No, I remembered it.

This was the world of an otome game I played to 100 percent completion in my past life: *Moonlight Beauty ~Be My Bride~*.

In the game, I, the heroine Shizuku Aritomo, would attend St. Delia's Academy and pursue one of five gorgeous love interests until he proposed.

The game's main hero was the eldest son of the CEO of the Mochizuki Corporation, the handsome prince Mitsuru Mochizuki, a second-year. He was the classic sort of hot guy. He came off as arrogant, but he deeply cared for his friends and could even be moved to tears under certain circumstances.

I was always a Mitsuru fangirl.

Ui Mikazuki was also a second-year. He was the second son of a branch family of the Mochizukis and an athletic prodigy. He could be a little frivolous, and even though he wasn't very smart, it was nearly impossible to hate him. His fans called him Ui-Ui.

The student council president, Sakutarou Shinmyou, was the only third-year of the group. The eldest son of a politician, he had a bit of a sadistic side to him, but the sex appeal depicted in his CGs made him popular with older female gamers.

Shirazu Izayoi was there to service the fans with a glasses fetish. He was a second-year, the same as Mochizuki

and Ui-Ui. The son of a doctor set to inherit his father's hospital, he was serious about his studies. His fangirls tended to find it adorable how he would get embarrassed and turn bright red.

Oboro Shimozuru was a former child actor and my future classmate. The son of the manager at one of the nation's largest talent agencies, his fluffy hair and round eyes gave him a cute puppy-dog appearance. He was my second favorite.

My heart pounded at the realization that I would actually get to spend my days with magnificent guys I once adored in a game.

What was I to do? Could I approach them now? If I did, it would make things easier in high school, right? After all, I was the heroine! As soon as that thought crossed my mind, I could stand it no longer. I made my way toward them. I gave the biggest smile I could muster. But just as I was about to call out to them, I saw butterflies in their midst.

It was a girl wearing a gorgeous butterfly kimono.

She wasn't making a move or saying a word, and yet all eyes were on her. Her name was Chouko Tsukuyomi. She was in the same grade as me.

She was the daughter of the head of the Tsukuyomi Corporation, similar in size to the Mochizuki Corporation. She had gorgeous black hair and was an accomplished traditional Japanese dancer. Intelligent and athletic with skill at any sport she tried, she was the picture of what a refined young heiress should be.

And my archnemesis.

After all, in *Moonlight Beauty ~Be My Bride~*, the goal was to win the favor of one of the five boys while also facing off against their childhood friend Chouko Tsukuyomi. Only by earning her approval would your love interest propose to you.

That's how the game was.

Yeah, that's right!

Was there any way I could compete against a girl in her position, though? From what I could remember of my past life, there were special items that could be bought to raise my chances, but there were no such things here. No shops selling stat increases and affection-boosting items.

I clenched my fist. I had no choice but to start from the beginning.

There was piano, traditional dance, etiquette, schoolwork, what else? What else was there? At any rate, I needed to get started. I only had seven years, until the spring of my fifteenth year. I could still make it.

If this was my reality, then I had to take it seriously and put my all into learning everything I could. Luck was on my side! There was no way I was letting my happily ever after get away!

Chapter 2: The Lady Plays the Otome Game

THE next day, it felt as if all eyes in the classroom were on me. Possibly because Shimozuru had been talking to me throughout the day.

“Tendou, your hair is so cute.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Have you picked an elective yet? If not, why not try art?”

“I think I’ll do music.”

“Would you like to have lunch with me...?”

“I’m sorry, I packed my lunch.”

Shimozuru was so kind. It was clear he was looking out for me, the school’s lone commoner. When I turned down his invitation, I was met with pleading puppy-dog eyes, but even those suited his gentle features.

Homeroom was spent giving us the campus tour, and the morning flowed uneventfully from one activity to the next until lunchtime. I had brought my meal from home and would be doing so from now on. I lifted one of the Vienna sausages to my lips and bit down; the savory blend of oil and meat blossomed in my mouth. It was so good.

Everything was quiet. How could today be so serene when yesterday had been anything but?

Just as I downed the black tea from my thermos in one go, a loud sound from the hallway shattered that serenity.

“*Urara Tendou!* Come here for a minute!”

“Uh...all right...”

Sayonara, my serenity.

Aritomo had been late that morning. The hospital she'd been taken to had kept her overnight just to be sure she didn't have a concussion. And now here she was, dragging me along. As full of energy as she was, I doubted she sustained any serious injuries. The classroom, which had been so lively with people just a short moment ago, was now vacant, so it proved the perfect setting for our discussion.

"So? You did stay put for an hour as I asked, didn't you?"

"Yes, I kept my word."

"Then why wasn't I able to trigger the event?"

I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

"Ui-Ui was supposed to scoop me up and whisk me off to the hospital where I would meet Shirazu, but that never happened. I even had them keep me overnight and yet he never came..."

The way she kept muttering to herself was unnerving. ...Ui-Ui? Shirazu?

"Um, you don't by any chance mean Mikazuki and Izayoi, do you?"

"And how exactly do *you* know them?"

"After you went to the hospital yesterday, we had lunch and tea together in the café."

Hands clenched and trembling, Aritomo opened her mouth wide, but she stopped herself before saying anything. Even so, I could tell she was on the verge of screaming my name. Somehow, I'd gotten used to her idiosyncrasies already.

"...I see. I understand now. Hehehe."

When she finally managed to get something out, her voice was raspy. Maybe she had hit her head harder than I thought?

"You're quite a strange NPC, aren't you? You're a character whose existence I can't seem to override. And yet that very existence makes this different from the world in my game."

My existence itself was being rejected.

"I mean, I wasn't selected as the scholarship student..."

Isn't that simply due to your grades? I tried my hardest to get in for free!

"...and it wasn't me the Prince rescued..."

Prince? She must mean Mochizuki. But it would be so crass for someone to actually try to force a rescue by throwing themselves onto—No, a lady never points out the obvious.

"...my hair wasn't even pink..."

Sorry, but it would be weird if your hair was pink. Please listen to yourself. Pink hair is extremely out of the ordinary as a natural hair color.

"...Urara Tendou, all of these things are your fault!"

I've been falsely accused!

"Pf...hahaha...HAHAHAHA! If that's how it is, then fine! Listen here, anomaly, I'll just bring you over to my side!"

Aritomo grabbed both of my hands in a death grip.

S-Sorry, but that really hurts! Please just calm down!

"Urara Tendou, here in this otome game, *Moonlight Beauty ~Be My Bride~*, you're going to be my ally and rush headfirst into battle over beautiful boys' hearts with me!"

I was dumbfounded at her bizarre declaration. I had no idea what she was talking about. What was an otome game? My mind was completely blank.

I had no idea how to respond, but the delicate tendencies of my past self had already taken over, and I fainted on cue.

Ah yes, the sweet escape of darkness.

When I awaken, this will all have been just a dream, right?

(((

"ARE you all right, Urara?"

When I awoke, the face of a raven-haired angel hovered over me with a worried look in her eyes. She held my hands tight in her own.

Ah, Lady Chouko. I was surprised to see her.

"Yes. Um, where am I...?"

My eyes darted around, and I realized I was lying atop a bed surrounded by a white curtain. It appeared to be the nurse's office. Had someone moved me here?

"The nurse's office. Everyone came back to the classroom just in time to see you collapse, so Ui brought you here."

Uh-oh. He must have carried me in his arms like a princess. The thought was a tad embarrassing. I must have been the center of attention, being held that way by the popular Mikazuki. *Wait.* I was immediately reminded of a conversation I had earlier... Didn't Aritomo say she wanted to be carried by Mikazuki? I wasn't going to hear the end of this.

Wait, what happened to Aritomo after that?

"Um, Lady Chouko..."

"I told you, it's just Chouko."

She said it with a gentle yet pleading tone. She squeezed my hands a bit tighter, and the imploring look she gave me made me feel bashful. Infinitely more so than being carried by Mikazuki.

"Oh, okay. Um...Miss...Chouko...?"

This was the best I could do. I couldn't even speak to Kirara without some formality.

"I see. I suppose that'll have to do for now."

She was finally satisfied. Hopefully she wouldn't mind if I called her "Lady Chouko" in my heart at least.

I attempted my inquiry once more. "Where is Aritomo?"

"Oh, that weird—ahem—that girl who was with you? She's in the corner bed."

There was the briefest slip in Lady Chouko's refined veneer. She nearly called Aritomo a weirdo. But I completely

agreed with the sentiment. Aritomo was in a class of her own to be able to temporarily crack Lady Chouko's perfect manners.

"Aritomo fainted as well?"

She looked like the picture of health to me, but maybe she was experiencing side effects from taking a ball to the head yesterday...

"In all the excitement of everyone trying to get to you, she slipped and hit her head on a desk."

That was Aritomo, for better or for worse.

"Mr. Kouzou Oniyamada, the PE teacher, scooped her up and brought her here."

I decided not to comment on Mr. Oniyamada's kindness. For my own serenity.

Now that I finally had a handle on the situation, I could breathe a sigh of relief.

"Urara," Lady Chouko began hesitantly, "would you rather not get involved with troublesome company like us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, my family and the Mochizukis are rather large, established families. It puts us in a different league and out of the loop, even at a school as prestigious as this. The other guys all come from similar backgrounds, which leaves us without many people we can really open up to..."

Lady Chouko's heartbroken expression as she told me this was hauntingly beautiful, like a painting.

"But even after that brief interaction yesterday, couldn't you tell they all liked you?"

"I'm no one special..."

"I heard you come from a normal family. But you seem like the sort of person we would enjoy having around. But if you don't want to, we won't force you."

So, Urara, you choose, Lady Chouko's eyes pleaded with me.

Naturally, a commoner like me would normally feel a bit awkward befriending people at the top of the food chain.

And there would certainly be those who wouldn't think fondly of my being with them.

I shouldn't want to be close to these people, supposedly our school's cream of the crop, after wanting so desperately in my past life to become a commoner. Those days of being bound by nobility, desperately trying to escape... But now? Now? In this life where I could laugh with my family, chat with friends, and celebrate the joy of life? My heart was free.

And I think that, as someone who is free, I can become friends with someone who is normally out of reach for a mere commoner if that is what we both want.

Especially when that someone was going to such lengths to befriend me. And I wanted to be her friend, too.

I answered Lady Chouko with a smile encompassing the way I felt.

I think we could be good friends.

As if sensing my thoughts, Lady Chouko gave my hand a firm squeeze, her whole face breaking into a smile.

"Then I'll ask again. Will you be my friend, Urara?"

"Yes. If you'll be mine. Let's be good friends, Lady Chouko."

We exchanged smiles.

I thought I heard Lady Chouko mutter "We have to start somewhere," but what could that have meant?

The Musings of Kirara Tendou

"KIRARA, I was wondering if you could explain something to me. Do you have a minute?"

"Me? Really?!"

Not that I minded. It was just, my big sister needed *me* to explain something? My big sister is the prettiest, smartest, most amazingly good-natured and refined girl I know.

But we're so different, which makes no sense since we both have the same parents and the same upbringing. Maybe we have some sort of hidden princess gene in our family line or something that comes out once every thousand years, and that's my sister.

First of all, the way we talk is totally different.

Most modern girls don't call their parents "Mother" and "Father." But my big sister does it all the time. And when she does, it doesn't sound weird at all.

She's never loud. And when she laughs, she does it softly and covers her mouth with her hand. And it's not just in public; she does it even at home. I asked Dad about it, but he said she's always been that way. It's how she came into the world.

It's so strange, I can't really explain it, and if it were anyone else, it wouldn't be normal. But with my sister, that's how it is. The way she talks and acts, everything, it all makes her who she is.

Then you have me on the other hand, a total *otaku*. I loooove anime, manga, games, and books. I try everything I can get my hands on and lose myself in it.

All my money—from New Year's gifts to my allowance—I sink into my hobbies. But to tell you the truth, my mom was an *otaku*, too, so she doesn't give me a hard time about it.

So I'm pretty much an expert on the subject, but what would a scholarship student from St. Delia's Academy want to know that I could teach her?

"So, whaddya wanna know?"

My middle school entrance ceremony was today, so my room was a little messy, as I still had my textbooks and gym uniform out. My sister had set to work cleaning it up right away and I was pulling on her sleeve to get her to answer me.

"Ah, yes. I'm terribly sorry. You have things to attend to as well, don't you, Kirara?"

"That's not the point. I have time for anything you need. You're the most important to me."

"Hehe, thank you. You're so sweet."

I couldn't help but meet my sister's smile with one of my own. After all, I love her!

My sister is so pretty and sweet. I know, I'm a total *siscon*!

"Well, see, there's something I'm having a difficult time understanding."

"Something difficult to understand?"

"A girl in my class got angry with me. She said I interrupted her 'event.'"

"...Huh?"

"And then, she looked me right in the eye and called me an 'NPC' and an 'anomaly.'"

"...Huh?"

"So just what is an 'otome game'?"

Haha—! For real?!

No way, no way, could this really be an isekai reincarnation story? Wait! So a modern-day otome game can be an isekai, too? And to think someone would label my sister an NPC! She'd definitely be the protagonist! Right? She couldn't get in the way of events if she was the main character.

I nodded to myself.

But no way. I'm an *otaku*, so of course my brain went there, but this was just the ramblings of a crazy girl. I mean, she believes she was reincarnated into a game. I don't really want her hanging around my sister.

"Kirara?"

Oh no, I had gotten lost in thought again. Bad *otaku* habit. Let's see, where was I? How to explain otome games... Oh, I've got it!

"Otome games are games filled with the dreams and wishes of young maidens. That's why they use the word for 'maiden': *otome*."

Yeah, I don't think that quite explains it.

"Are they like romance novels?"

It looks as if my explanation wasn't enough for even my smart sister to pick up on.

Um, um...

"Basically, yeah. They're games for girls with tons of romance and stuff—" I heard a voice say as Haruto barged in through my bedroom's open door, smartphone in hand. Ugh, you can't just walk into a maiden's room.

"I see. Thank you, Haruto."

He gave a soft "Mm-hm," but his cheeks were turning red.

My brother was an even worse *siscon* than me, though only for our big sister.

And how long had he been eavesdropping on us?!

"But you want something more specific, right?"

Oh, that's right! The ultimate siscon is right! We have to give her a more detailed explanation.

"In an otome game, you have numerous love interests you can choose from to go after until you become his girlfriend."

Not a bad explanation. My sister tilted her head thoughtfully. It was kinda cute.

"But how could I possibly intrude? It's just a game, right?"

Right.

And I couldn't really explain why the weird girl would think that when my sister didn't know about reincarnation and *isekai* stories. I thought using a novel or manga might be easier to explain and started picking through my shelf.

Oooh, a villainess reincarnation story could be good. I had a thing for them. But modern settings might be better. So I grabbed about ten books with various themes and genres and set them down in front of my sister.

"Here, all of these are stories about otome games."

"My, you sure have a lot."

Nah, those were only a fraction. There were many, many, many more; these were just ones from series featuring otome games. It would be so much faster to have her read webnovels, but my sister isn't tech savvy and doesn't have a smartphone, so books it is. I started to hand them to my sister when Haruto snatched them up.

"These are pretty heavy. I'll carry them for you."

Why, that little... I guess Haruto really was every bit the *siscon* I pegged him for.

"Thank you, Haruto."

Seeing my sister beam like that was so cute that I couldn't stay mad. But the way my brother followed her around like a lost puppy made me worry about his future. Really.

"If you have any questions while reading, feel free to ask, 'kay?"

"Thank you, Kirara. I'm sure I'll have many questions for you."

I gave them a wave and saw them out of my room.

Still, I couldn't believe something like this could happen to someone I know. That's definitely just my luck as an *otaku*. But who knows if it was true. As I rolled onto my bed, that thought lingered in my mind.

Thinking our world could be an otome game made me laugh. It cracked me up.

(((

I was in complete and utter shock.

Those books Kirara gave me on the subject of "otome games" were rather surprising. I had no idea there were so many people who had been reincarnated into other worlds.

Naturally, I understood that the stories in those books were just fiction, but then again, I still retained the memories of Annerosa, daughter of Count Ortegammo of the

Kingdom of Lacrofine, a country that didn't exist in this world. I couldn't very well bring myself to doubt the veracity of all these stories.

If I had been reincarnated from another world into this one, then there should be nothing suspect about Aritomo being reborn into this world, which she claimed was an otome game.

And after reading all these different stories, I could understand Aritomo's desire to take charge of this game's narrative and win the love of an attractive boy.

I did understand. As a maiden myself, I appreciated where she was coming from. However...

"However, I must decline to help you..."

"I refuse."

How could she refuse my refusal?

"I want you to be my ally. I won't just accept your *help*."

You're missing the point. Furthermore, you're making it sound like I have no choice. If only I could be as brave out loud as I was in my thoughts.

At any rate, the fact that she had summoned me to meet her behind the gym for lunch today had me nervous.

I needed to be braver. I needed to just come out and tell her.

"...I can't."

"No!"

So much for that. No, I had to try.

"Umm, well, I have looked into it, and...am I correct in assuming you have been reincarnated into an otome game, Aritomo?"

"Yes, that's what I've been trying to tell you this whole time!"

She never came out and told me that before.

"I'm the heroine of *Moonlight Beauty ~Be My Bride~*. The one and *only* heroine who can get the Prince, Ui-Ui, Saku, Shirazu, and Oboro to fall for her!"

“But I have nothing to do with any of that, right? So what could I possibly do to help you?”

“I don’t know why, but you’re not supposed to be able to change who the heroine is. And yet, you’ve had these uncanny run-ins with the Prince and the others that are essentially a rip-off of the game’s events. That’s why I need you to be my ally.”

She’s insistent on this, but it’s really not for me.

“How come you’re so against it? ...Wait. You’re not actually trying to go out with one of those five guys, are you?”

Nope. But they were all so wonderful, I felt bad denying it outright. The person I was most interested in wasn’t one of the five. It was...

“Which one is Chouko Tsukuyomi betrothed to?”

In some of the books Kirara loaned me, a villainess almost always stood in direct opposition to the heroine.

And any woman who appeared in the game aside from the heroine was often the main love interest’s fiancée. So what about Lady Chouko? She and I had only just become friends; I didn’t want to do anything to make her hate me. That was the main reason I had turned Aritomo down.

Listening to my question with a quizzical look, Aritomo shrugged.

“She’s not anyone’s fiancée. She’s not even dating someone. She’s just their childhood friend.”

And then, at last, Aritomo explained the plot of *Moonlight Beauty ~ Be My Bride~*.

“So you are to have an Ojousama Challenge, and if you best Lady Chouko, you all become friends.”

“More or less. That’s the watered-down version.”

Indeed. I finally felt as if I understood essentially what she was after...but I had no idea whether she could outclass a real lady like Lady Chouko.

As I tilted my head, Aritomo doubled down on me.

“Hehehe. I may not look like much, but the second I realized my role as the heroine of this story, I threw myself into my lessons.”

“I see...”

“I never expected to have an irregular NPC like you in my game. But that might just work to my advantage. You’re my insurance policy. Just go with it and be my partner.”

No, I have no desire to be your partner. Besides that, I have no desire to become Lady Chouko’s enemy.

I struggled to think of a way to turn her down. As I did, I heard what sounded like someone kicking a rock. I turned back to see Lady Chouko calmly standing there. And then—

“Why not, Urara? Let’s do the Ojousama Challenge!” Lady Chouko exclaimed with an entertained smile.

Wh-What? Whaaaaat? What did she just say? Lady Chouko, don’t fall for it! Having her appear before us like that was one thing, but then for her to say that! To think she would agree to something like this!

I thought Lady Chouko just saw Aritomo as some weird girl.

“Oh, Chouko...”

Just as I addressed Lady Chouko, still with that mysterious smile on her face, I heard an unsettling noise from behind me.

“Chou-ko Tsu-ku-yo-mi!”

Eek! Aritomo really was scary! The way she growled almost reminded me of a horror movie I had seen recently.

Yet, Lady Chouko seemed not to care. Her eyes remained on me, bidding me to answer. She was completely ignoring Aritomo.

“Why are y—”

“Why are you here, Chouko Tsukuyomi?!”

Aritomo cut me off. At least she could speak normally, though I wished she’d do the same for me.

Lady Chouko fixed Aritomo with a cool glance before rushing over to me and taking my hands in hers.

"I was hoping we might have lunch together, so I came looking for you. I never expected to find you in a place like this," she said, giving Aritomo another look, icier than the last. Aritomo looked as if she had been hit with a blizzard.

I saw the slightest hint of a shiver from Aritomo, but she attempted to pretend to be strong. She didn't falter.

"Wait. Why are you so friendly with Chouko Tsukuyomi?"

As for me? I completely faltered.

"Chouko and I recently became friends."

"ExCUSE ME?!"

Aritomo's mouth gaped, a complete contrast with Lady Chouko's wide grin.

I wasn't sure how I would handle a confrontation between the two of them.

I could hear Aritomo gnashing her teeth and muttering, "I can't believe the nerve of this random NPC..."

What was I to do?

"Aritomo, was it?"

"Huh?"

Lady Chouko's voice seemed to finally pull Aritomo from her grumbling inner world.

"You wish to challenge me?"

She was so direct, it was surprising.

"H-Huh? I-I mean, yes, that's correct."

Clearly outmatched, somehow she managed to answer. Lady Chouko looked her right in the eye.

"I don't allow those who are unworthy to mingle with my friends. Neither do they. And I'm sure neither does Urara. That's why I have chosen to accept your challenge. Best me and I will accept you."

Her regal words were so fitting.

However, they only made Aritomo quake with anger.

I expected her to act tough or suspicious of Lady Chouko, but instead, she shouted triumphantly.

"Yes! I did it! The initial event has been triggered!"

I'm sorry, what?

“To be honest, I’m not happy that my first event is the Ojousama Challenge, but no matter! Now my affection stats can start going up!”

Did she hit her head?

“Ahh, I’m so relieved, this is actually making me hungry. My, look at the time. Ta-ta for now.”

Hearing that, Lady Chouko heaved a sigh as we watched Aritomo blissfully skip away.

“She really is a strange girl.”

Even Lady Chouko’s words seemed to imply she had abandoned all hope for Aritomo.

But I agreed with her. I truly did.

(((

AFTER the confrontation with Aritomo, Lady Chouko took my hand and led me to the terrace café. I initially declined, as I had brought my lunch, but she insisted, tugging me along. Her grip was viselike and left me no choice but to accept.

When we reached the other members of the Sparkling Six, I found my lunch propped up on the table as if it were in a museum. I had wrapped it in a cloth featuring the super-cute children’s cartoon character the Black-Legged Sloth.

Mochizuki complimented how “cute” the sloth wrap was, his pearly white teeth gleaming, but the corners of his mouth twitched. The others seemed to be fighting a similar urge to laugh. Mikazuki already looked exhausted, as if he had laughed himself out.

Well, I thought it was adorable, but the others seemed to think otherwise.

We didn’t have much time left for lunch, so I got out my chopsticks.

The others had already ordered, it seemed. The boys sometimes shared their food with one another, and today

they had ordered a great deal. I watched with admiration. Clearly, growing boys really did need more food.

However, the most surprising was Lady Chouko, who was also eating quite a large amount. It was difficult to tell at first, as her movements were as delicate as ever, but on closer inspection, the food in front of her was disappearing at a rapid pace.

When we were about halfway through our meal, I softly asked Lady Chouko a question that may not have been my business, but I could not help myself.

"Chouko, aren't you a little concerned about Aritomo?"

"Her little Ojousama Challenge? No, I don't believe it will be a problem."

She answered my question with a smile, but I thought I heard a note of coldness in her voice. No, I must have imagined it.

At any rate, if Lady Chouko said it was no problem, then everything should be all right. I heaved a sigh of relief, that weight now lifted off my shoulders.

"Well, I suppose if you say it will be fine. Still..."

Hm? Still...? Why did I say that?

I should have been relieved. And yet, something about it still bothered me.

"You are concerned for me? Thank you, Urara."

Ah, that must be it. I was worried. Not just about the competition itself, but the possibility that Aritomo would continue to bother Lady Chouko. Yes, that must have been it.

I nodded and smiled at Lady Chouko after she thanked me. She flashed another brilliant smile in return.

"By the way, Urara, your lunch looks delicious. Did you make it yourself?"

"Thank you very much. Yes, everyone in my family packs their lunch, so I try to help my mother prepare half the food."

"I see. What have you brought today?"

"All that's left of it is the *tamagoyaki*."

Lady Chouko turned that radiant face of hers my way and opened her mouth with an “Ahhh.”

“Oh, here you go.”

With the innocent way she pressed me for a bite, I couldn't help but grab a piece and place it gently in her mouth.



“Mm, it’s good.”

The broad grin she gave me was worth the sacrifice.

But hearing the shouts from the others quickly brought me back to the present.

“Seriously...?”

“I was after her, though!”

“Hm?”

“You must be joking.”

“Was that an indirect kiss?!”

Wait, wait, wait, just hold on now! But...they were right. I honestly hadn’t thought of that. But it really was an indirect kiss.

I was so embarrassed, having it happen in an open space like the terrace.

As I still had my memories of my past life as a count’s daughter, having such an intimate moment take place under the gaze of so many others was not exactly something I was ready for.

Even if it happened with another girl. Yes, that still really bothered me.

My face was so hot, I thought smoke might shoot out of my ears. And yet Lady Chouko merely said in a light tone: “If you’re this talented a cook, I look forward to the cooking contest, Urara.”

Wh-What?

“I can’t wait to eat more of your cooking.”

Uh...umm...is she suggesting... My mind went to the impossible.

“Um, you are going to make me— I mean, I have to participate in the Ojousama Challenge as well?”

“Of course. I thought I made that clear, didn’t I?”

She was right—she did...

“I doubt we’ll have any trouble besting that girl, so let’s just enjoy the experience. Okay?”

Naturally, I had agreed because Lady Chouko was involved, but I didn’t want to compete. I couldn’t help

feeling I had been dragged into it. What was I going to do?

(((

AFTER lunch, we spent our afternoon classes discussing study strategies for our assessment tests. Hardly any of our actual classes had started yet, but already we had been assigned several pages in the textbook based on the tests.

This was going to be tougher than I thought. And judging from the cries of agony in our hallway, I wasn't the only one.

At least Aritomo was in the same position, so I was able to take some small comfort in the fact that she would likely be more subdued between now and the day of the test.

When the final subject, English, was brought to an end with the resounding of the bell, our class breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Several of my classmates were facedown on their desks; others were gazing vacantly up at the ceiling. Everyone seemed desperate to be anywhere but here, myself included, and so as I reached for my bag to make my esc—I mean, return home, someone called out to me.

I had a hunch this was going to happen.

"Tendou! Let's have a chat! Wait!"

Well, Aritomo certainly had a commendable resilience. She must have felt ridiculously confident in her ability to pass the test.

"Oh, I, umm, have something I need to do."

"What?! But I need to talk to you!"

But I have nothing to say to you... I knew it was useless to refuse.

Resigned to my fate, I returned to my seat. Aritomo pulled out the chair in front of me, folded her arms, and sat down with a huff.

"I'm working on my strategy, and you're going to help me."

"...Okay."

Lady Chouko had already compelled me to participate, so I knew trying to get out of it was pointless.

As I sat there nodding, a shadow loomed over us.

"Hey, what are you ladies talking about?"

"Us?"

We both looked up to see Shimozuru gazing down on us with an affable smile.

"Shimozuru—"

"Ehehe, Oboro! Nothing you need to worry about!" Aritomo interrupted with a bright smile, trying to sound alluring. Too bad Shimozuru already knew about the contest. Lady Chouko told her friends during lunch.

"Oh, I already heard about that thing you're doing. The Ojousama Challenge, right?"

Shocked at his words, Aritomo rounded on me, and I instinctively looked away. *It wasn't me. I'm innocent.*

"I heard about it from Chouko."

"Oh dear, how embarrassing. I didn't want you finding out, Oboro," she cooed in a cutesy voice.

"You've got guts, taking on Chouko like that."

"Hehehe, 'taking on' sounds so serious. We're just having a little fun to get to know each other better. If anything, it's a way for me to push myself to do better."

Her pupils had become dots. She was a champion at running her mouth.

She was so good at putting on a show, I almost wanted to give her a round of applause.

"Oh, come on. Everyone's already saying what a f—I mean, what a fine challenger you'll make, going against Chouko."

Before he corrected himself, I was positive I heard him about to say "fatality" and "total failure."

“Oh my!” Aritomo’s hands flew to her cheeks, and she let out a raucous laugh, even as her eyes displayed another emotion.

I suppose she genuinely didn’t want anyone else to know about the competition. To me, that seemed a pointless worry.

After a deep breath, her eyes met Shimozuru’s, and she held his gaze as she spoke. “Whether it’s a challenge or just life itself, you can’t stand by and wait for things to happen. You have to make them happen.”

Well...despite her many strange behaviors and the way she kept dragging me into things, I had to applaud her assertiveness and ability to act.

In a strange way, it made me want to help her.

Shimozuru was dumbfounded but quickly regained his composure.

“Well, in that case, how about an advisor for your challenge?”

“Really?!”

Was that fair to Lady Chouko? I was in no rush to completely revolt against her.

“It’s fine. Chouko’s the one who suggested it, after all. So I’ll be your advisor. I can tell her later.”

...Seriously?

“First of all, the contest will consist of five rounds. You have to win three. We guys will be the judges. Each of us will take turns handling one of the contests, so try to keep in mind our individual likes to improve your chances,” Shimozuru explained effortlessly. Clearly he had come specifically to talk to us about this.

“Also, you’ll have one of us as an advisor before each challenge. This time, it’s me.”

“I’d say you came less to advise and more to troll,” Aritomo said, cutting him off.

Didn’t she say he was a love interest or something before? Was it really okay to talk to him like that?

“Haha, that was blunt! When I say ‘advisor,’ not everyone is going to take the position seriously. Some of the guys will give you advice, some might laugh at you, and some might ignore you completely. It’s up to you two to seek your advisor out and win them over.”

In other words, if we chose not to gain our advisor’s favor, we were willingly putting ourselves at a disadvantage.

“I can tell you that, at this point, not everyone is keen on helping you.”

Aritomo’s face drained of color as she nodded.

This looked like yet another element she hadn’t expected. To her, affability and affection appeared to be a question of raising stats. But that was out of my hands. It was on her to decide to play by their rules or not.

“...All right. I accept your conditions. Please tell us what we need to do.” After a brief moment of hesitation, she clenched her fist and responded to Shimozuru.

“Okay! My first piece of advice: the judge is Ui Mikazuki. He’s a meathead, so if the challenge is arts related, you’ll wanna do something entertaining to distract him. That won’t work on the others, though,” he said with a simple smile.

I wondered if the way Aritomo’s face had gone pale was doing anything for her affection stats. Accepting their conditions seemed to have a positive effect on Shimozuru, at least.

With that settled, we moved on to discussing strategy.

According to Shimozuru, since the meathead Mikazuki would be judging the first round, we were better off focusing on pleasing him over trying to counter Lady Chouko’s efforts...

“No need for us to be sneaky like that. I want to face her head-on, fair and square,” Aritomo said in a nasally tone.

“No, no, no, if you do it that way, you’ll be no match for her,” Shimozuru insisted, his acidic words sounding odd coming from a face as gentle and charming as his.

We were getting nowhere with this constant back-and-forth.

Certainly, what Aritomo said was rather noble, but I doubted a direct attack would work when it came to competing with Lady Chouko.

After all, Lady Chouko was the picture of refinement, the perfect lady—or *ojousama*—from head to toe. She would have fit right in among the Lacrofine nobility. To think she reached such heights with the training she received in this modern world.

Not only did she have that going for her, but Lady Chouko had trained rigorously in academics, athletics, and the arts, displaying a prodigious talent in each.

Just as Shimozuru said, facing her head-on would be impossible.

“Listen, I don’t know what you’re getting so worked up over. You don’t want to win?” Shimozuru asked after several exchanges, clearly exasperated.

“Of course I want to win! But...in the...in the game...”

“Game?” Shimozuru tilted his head quizzically.

Ah, to her, that otome game is how she wants things to be, and getting things to play out that way is what dictates her choices. If I think about her actions that way, it makes a little more sense.

If she follows the path set forth in the game and does what she’s supposed to, then she, too, can become happy like the character in the game. That’s how she can achieve her happily ever after.

But Shimozuru, myself, the others, and especially Lady Chouko were not puppets on a stage. We weren’t just some soulless characters in a story.

Something was boiling over within me. An emotion I had never felt before, in this life or the last.

SMACK! In lieu of a folding fan, I slapped my index and middle finger down on the desk, and it resonated throughout the room.

I suspect no one expected such behavior from someone like me. The two of them gaped at me, taken aback.

"Aritomo, we should take Shimozuru's advice."

"Huh, w-wait, what's gotten into you all of a sudden?"

"You were the one who suggested the Ojousama Challenge, but if you truly want to best Chouko, then you shouldn't be afraid to employ cruel tactics or sly techniques."

"Wait...sly? Cruel? Was my strategy really that bad?"

The two of them faltered at my sudden change in demeanor, but I was undeterred.

"Lady Chouko is the most refined of the refined, as the result of over a decade of hard work. She has shown fastidious resolve and unwavering diligence."

I was well aware that I had only known Lady Chouko for a very short time and that I had no occasion to see how she acted outside of school. But she was even more genteel than some of the dignified nobles I had known in my past life. It was not an exaggeration to say she was on par with the monarchy.

"Aritomo, you've put in so much effort, but it is a drop in the bucket compared to hers. And you keep bringing up this game, but...there is no reset button on reality the way there is in a game."

"...I know."

"And you were insistent on Lady Chouko and me participating in this, so we expect you to put nothing less than your best into it. Treat it like you would a matter of life and death."

Because I intend to play to win, understand? That's how I expected Lady Chouko would have responded.

Seeing Aritomo bob her head in agreement, I took a breath.

After having blurted that out in one go, my chest ached. However, I did feel a bit better. Seeing me like that, Shimozuru began muttering something to himself.

"I...think I'm beginning to see what K—I mean, Chouko sees in you."

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. Well then, now that we've got things out in the open, it's time to make some concrete plans. Some 'cruel, sly' plans, was it?"

"That's right, so what should we do?"

And that's how I finally began *playing* the otome game of my own free will.

(((

"SO, we've decided on a piano contest for the first challenge, then."

As the third wheel of sorts, I had to mediate for the other two so they wouldn't fight.

"What piece will you perform...?"

"Twelve Variations on 'Ah vous dirai-je, Maman.' Also known as 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.'"

Shimozuru nodded, looking pleased. "Ui won't care whether it's right or wrong, but the fact that it's a piece he knows will score points with him."

"I get that, but Twelve Variations on 'Ah vous dirai-je, Maman' is a difficult piece! It's very hard to play right."

Oh dear. I assumed it was a piece everyone knew, but the middle part was where it got difficult.

"I know, but you want to show how talented you are in the arts, don't you? But if you're not confident in your abilities, I don't advise forcing yourself to play it."

I glanced at Aritomo. Shimozuru was clearly fanning her flames.

"...Wha—? I have confidence! Loads of it! I simply haven't played the piano in eight years is all! But I'll nail that piece!" she roared.

At least her heart was in the right place.

However, Shimosuru had an impressive ability. In just this short time, he had learned to play Aritomo like a piano. He was a quick study.

Nodding to herself, Aritomo changed the subject. "So, what do you intend to do, Urara Tendou?"

Me again...?

"I'm also going to perform a piece of music?"

"Duh! You're my partner, so of course."

What exactly is her definition of *partner*? I thought of asking her, but I doubted the tirade that would follow would be productive, so I decided just to let it go for now.

Still, I had something I needed to tell them.

"I have never taken music lessons before."

"What?!" they both cried out.

I couldn't believe they were so shocked. After all, I came from a family with three children and among commoners; such lessons were seen as wasteful. Not only that, but to be honest, I remembered how my tutors in my past life had been dreadfully strict and I preferred to abstain when given the option. Though Haruto did practice kendo at a dojo and Kirara attended painting lessons.

"Ah, but I do enjoy dabbling with instruments a bit. Back at my old school, we tried our hand at a variety of them in music class, so I can play a few notes."

In my past life, there was an instrument that resembled a piano, massive, heavy, and with many keys that made it difficult to play. In comparison, the pianos of this world were easy and a delight to use.

"You know...you're a bit of a disappointment as a partner."

And what could I say to that?

"Now, now. Tendou was the one forced into this against her will. You should be nice to her."

"...You're right. Now that I think of it, it only makes you more likable, Urara Tendou."

Finally they understand. If only I could get her to stop using my full name all the time.

“Well, just make sure you pick a song to play...or else...”

I heard her muttering something along the lines of “Chouko Tsukuyomi will become scary,” but that wasn’t true. Lady Chouko was always so kind to me.

I looked to Shimozuru for reassurance and received a stunning smile instead. “I have something else I’d like you to do, Tendou. I hope you won’t mind.”

(((

“SO, Aritomo has chosen the piano.”

“Yes. Shimozuru will inform you once we’ve selected the date.”

Lady Chouko was at the library. Some time had passed since Shimozuru had sent me to find her.

He sent me as a spy, hoping that when I reported the details to her, she would tell me what piece she intended to perform... In other words:

“Yeah, because I’m cruel and sly, right?”

I hadn’t been sure how to respond to that.

Now that I had shared the details of the first challenge, we were both making our way out of the school.

“What kind of music do you like, Urara?” Lady Chouko asked as we walked.

“Let’s see...”

Shimozuru was hoping to prey on Lady Chouko’s desire to be kind, expecting she would agree to the piece they had picked for Aritomo’s benefit.

And yet, what I really wanted was to hear Lady Chouko play for me. And so, even though it was selfish, I told her the truth.

“I like music that’s soft and gentle.”

“I see. Then I’ll pick a song that fits that description—I’ll play it just for you.”

Her smile in that moment was so lovely, so beguiling, I could feel the heat rising in my face.

What was I to do? This incredible person I looked up to was here with me, and I felt incredibly giddy.

Lady Chouko and I continued chatting, and I wondered if she knew how badly I was trembling. I was basically in my own world up until we reached the gate, when someone called out to me.

“Big Sister!”

“Haruto, what are you doing here?”

“Kirara asked me to check on you, since you weren’t home yet.”

Ah yes. I had promised to take Kirara shopping tonight. With everything that was happening with Aritomo, I had completely forgotten.

“Oh no, I need to hurry home. Haruto, I apologize for the trouble. Did you come all this way for me?”

“Nah, I was on my way back from kendo...”

Haruto jabbed his thumb at the bamboo sword and armor bags slung over his shoulder. When he did this, I noticed a shocked expression on his face.

He was staring at Lady Chouko.

“Oh, Chouko, this is my younger brother, Haruto. Haruto, this is Chouko Tsukuyomi. She’s a friend of mine.”

I quickly introduced them to avoid any impropriety.

Lady Chouko seemed to freeze for a second before her face quickly softened into that smile I had come to know.

“Hello there. I am Chouko Tsukuyomi. Your sister is always so nice to me.”

“...Yo.”

That introduction lacked any kindness or manners. At the risk of being called a nag, I was about to scold him, but Lady Chouko stopped me.

"It's all right, Urara. You must be in a hurry, yes? Please don't let me hold you up."

I was relieved to hear her usual calm tone. I bowed my head and turned to leave when, suddenly, Haruto turned to Lady Chouko.

"Hey...do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"Haruto, that's not nice..."

"...No. I am an only child. I have no siblings."

Why did it matter? Lady Chouko's tone seemed a little aggressive, weaving a tense air between them.

"Oh...never mind."

I didn't understand why he had asked—maybe he knew someone who resembled Lady Chouko? Haruto pivoted on his heel.

I turned back to Lady Chouko and gave another light bow before following my brother.

Kogetsu Tsukuyomi's Recollection

I'VE known since I was very young that my understanding of the world is quite different from society's. Likely ever since I've been able to conceive my place in society.

But what good does that understanding do?

I've fallen in line with their desires, taken the lessons forced upon me without complaint. I have accepted it all as a fact of my life.

Charitably, I've been called obedient and earnest; insultingly, I've been called mechanical and apathetic. That's how others have described me.

However, I have managed to keep any blemishes on my reputation under wraps, maintaining my good name in the eyes of others. I felt as long as that was the case, nothing else mattered.

Until that fateful day...

"What are they doing?"

I saw a group of elementary schoolers through a chain-link fence who looked about my age in navy-blue *hakama* pants, swinging their bamboo swords. My attendant answered in a mildly amused tone.

"They appear to be children practicing with a kendo club. Ah, there's a dojo here."

"Kendo..."

I watched as boys and girls crossed swords.

Girls and boys aren't usually equal in strength, but the differences in gender are so minute at that age that they appeared to be on equal footing. That was what caught my attention.

However, it didn't seem I would fit in easily there. So, as mad as I was about it, I cut the hair I'd been growing out for years. It had been my first act of rebellion in my entire life. It would be a while before I realized just how much of a stir this caused.

Perhaps in an effort to stem any further outbursts from me, my parents allowed me to practice kendo at the dojo in secret, with several restrictions and under the watchful eyes of two of my friends.

I was grateful when Ui from the Mikazuki family and Sakutarou from the Shinmyou family agreed to accompany me. Saku is the scheming type, so he can handle just about anything. And Ui's just an idiot, so I leave him to his own devices.

That was how I started kendo, and yet I found myself thoroughly enjoying it. Once again I lived up to the expectation of being perfect and quickly excelled at the sport, but that was just an added bonus.

In the beginning, very few students would come near me, as I can be fairly unapproachable, but eventually, the others began talking to me. Among them was one boy who was a year or so younger than me. No matter how many times he lost to me, he kept coming back to challenge me over and over again. I began to feel protective over him.

Part of my agreement with my parents was that I would not participate in tournaments or advancement ceremonies. Originally, that was fine; I had no interest in either. But over time, I wanted a way to test my own strength. So, I stole away one day without telling anyone and went to observe that boy's advancement ceremony.

The event was held at a tiny venue that was nonetheless packed with people. I looked all over for the boy.

"Kogetsu!"

I caught the boy with the round, olive eyes charging toward me and gave him a noogie. "Don't pounce on me while wearing your armor, Haruto! It's painful!"

Haruto whined that I was hurting him. I told him to deal with it. I was shorter than he was, though not by much, even though he was a year younger, so when he came flying into me, he hit my stomach.

"So, how'd it go?"

"Hehe!" Haruto grinned and flashed the peace sign.

I was a little disappointed that I'd come all this way when it was already over.

Just as I was getting ready to leave, he pulled on my sleeve.

"Aw, you're leaving already?"

"Yeah, no real reason for me to stay."

Maybe it was because he wasn't used to seeing me outside the dojo, but he seemed desperate for me to remain there.

"Hey, c'mon, I'm gonna let you meet my big sister just this once, so don't go yet."

"I don't care about your sister. And what's with the attitude? You'll *let* me meet her?"

"You'll wish you had! She's really cute. A total princess."

Get lost, kid. I've had my fill of "total princesses."

How stupid. Your princess sister can get lost. Ahh, this is so annoying—I don't CARE.

It shouldn't have mattered, and yet I was being swallowed up by a haze of dark emotions. I'd come all this way for a distraction, only to end up like this. I didn't even get to see what I'd come for.

Just as I turned to leave, I caught sight of an angel.

She was a little ways away from me, this sweet girl who was so unlike anyone else here, standing with two adults I suspected were Haruto's parents.

That soft air around her, those graceful movements. Her glistening brown hair fell in subtle waves. Though difficult to see from so far away, I suspected her eyes were the same lovely brown. Long lashes adorned her eyes. She had done nothing, just stood there, and yet I could already tell she was special.

She was the ideal girl, the sort that would inhabit any boy's dreams.

I gulped instinctively.

"...Hey, Haruto, do you..." *...know that girl?*

Just as I was about to ask him, he called out, "That's her! That's my sister, right over there. Heyyy! Urara!"

Hearing Haruto call her name, the girl turned gracefully and gave a dainty wave.

"Haruto, she's...your big sister?"

"That's right. She's beautiful, huh?" Haruto responded cheerfully, completely disregarding the hoarseness of my voice.

I thought he'd just been over-praising his sister, but truthfully he hadn't complimented her enough. She really was the perfect girl. How could a boorish, low-class kid like him end up with the pinnacle of elegance for an older sister?

Clearly, you could see similarities in their physical appearance, yet their mannerisms couldn't be further apart.

But that was irrelevant. I was completely taken with her.

This girl named Urara—

A familiar black car was waiting for me when I stepped out of the venue. I was afraid I had been found out, but I was

so ready to leave that I no longer cared. I quickly slid inside the door that had been opened for me.

Saku and Ui were inside, looking exasperated. *Ah, perfect...*

"Saku, let me have the wig."

It was the wig I used to play *Chouko*. Now that I had cut my hair, I couldn't be seen as her without it, so it was only natural Saku would have it with him.

"Why? You've never asked to wear it before."

"I'm gonna start living as Chouko. So don't call me Kogetsu anymore."

"Hmph. You're always telling us to call you that when we're alone. Why the change of heart?"

A curious look in his eye, Saku reverently removed a wig from an opened bag and handed it to me.

"I've met the ideal girl."

"Oh, so now you don't wanna be a boy anymore?"

"Shut up, Ui, you idiot. It's not that."

I was born a boy.

However, I had agreed to suppress that part of me for a while.

As the heir to the Tsukuyomi name, I had been bound for years to live as a perfectly refined woman until the Full Moon Festival, as per our family's ridiculous tradition. Rebelling against that custom hadn't been worth the trouble. So I used times like these as a chance to take a breather, before being forced to return to my dispassionate routine. But now, things had changed.

My entire thought process had changed. It was a revolution, if you will.

If I was to continue this farce until my fifteenth birthday, then I was going to go all in. Even grow my hair out. I would adopt all the necessary mannerisms. I would so thoroughly become Chouko Tsukuyomi that even my loudest detractors would be left speechless.

I would become the perfect heir to the Tsukuyomi name.

And then, I would make that beautiful angel—Urara—mine.

I swore it.

Chapter 3: The Lady Takes the Challenge

BEFORE I knew it, the day of the contest had arrived.

It was held the last Friday in April, in the music room after school.

The room closely resembled one of the music salons patronized by the Lacrofine nobility, but I suppose that was only natural for an affluent school like St. Delia's. Standing before the rows of luxuriously upholstered chairs was a massive, white grand piano.

It was the first time I had seen that piano here. When we used this room for class the other day, I was sure I saw the usual black one. ...No, my mind must have been playing tricks on me. The school chairman was also the patriarch of the Mochizuki family, but surely he wouldn't switch out the piano just for our competition...at least, I didn't think he would go that far. Probably not.

"Good, it got here in time," Mochizuki said, his words sounding rather dubious as he stroked the white piano lid. On closer inspection, I realized he was casually wearing an accessory with a butterfly motif.

Did he special-order this piano two weeks ago?

"Show some restraint, Mitsuru," Izayoi, the boy with the glasses, said with disgust.

"Hmph. If Tsukuyomi wants to participate, then it's only natural I'd back her up," Mochizuki retorted with a pout. "Even with something as pointless as this."

Wow...that was surprising. It was a passive-aggressive sort of support.

More importantly, it was clear Mochizuki certainly had a hand in all this and wasn't very pleased with the competition.

Lady Chouko met his words with a slightly vexed expression. "You've always been incorrigible, Mitsuru. I would keep my distance, Urara. His pigheadedness might be contagious," she said, turning my way. Perhaps her displeasure was greater than her face conveyed.

Aritomo was clearly nervous, likely because she had drawn the first straw. She hadn't even noticed the piano had been swapped or Mochizuki's spiteful choice of words. Shimozuru had been trying his best to comfort her.

"I'm all right, it's all right...yeah, I'm fine," she muttered to herself. "What? Did you say something?"

She definitely was *not* all right.

At this rate, all that practice would be for naught if she couldn't pull herself together. Victory was a distant concern at this point.

I certainly didn't completely accept that this was all just some otome game scenario, but since she had given up eight years of her life working relentlessly in pursuit of these so-called events, I couldn't simply let her efforts go to waste. She had worked so terribly hard for this chance that it made me want to cheer her on.

My eyes met Shimozuru's, and they begged him to speak up, to give her some encouragement. *Please say something to her! I leave it to you!* He nodded and accepted the challenge.

"Hey, Aritomo, I know you've been working hard preparing for today."

"...Yeah."

"In the beginning, I just thought you were some weirdo, but when I saw how fearlessly you went after Chouko, I was actually entertained by you."

"....."

"Weirdo"? "Went after"? "Entertained"? *Maybe you could have picked better words, Shimozuru.*

"I think you should try to forget about the competition and just play what's in your heart. Maybe you could focus on

playing for me instead?”

What a charming thing for someone to say.

Bravo! Those cajoling words paired perfectly with that charming face. Now we were finally getting somewhere like in those books about otome games that Kirara lent me.

Well, Aritomo, what say you?

“...M—”

M?

“Mo...”

Most certainly?

“Maybe I should just focus on Mochizuki.”

No! Wrong choice!

His face went pale at having his flirting unceremoniously brushed aside. I turned to Aritomo.

“Aritomo!”

“What? ...It’s just, the Prince was my first choice, but Oboro was my second choice, so...”

Hearing her mumble those thoughtless words, I had a sudden realization. I faced her and heaved a gentle sigh.

“All right, then.”

“What?”

“If you’re this nervous, Aritomo, then I will go first.”

“...Huh?”

“I had intended to go last, hoping it would be treated as an afterthought, but this works fine, too. I haven’t studied the piano much, but I’ll at least play better than someone so nervous their fingers freeze. Thank you for making me look better by comparison, Aritomo.” I covered my mouth with my hand and laughed. “Hehehe.”

Aritomo’s pale face began to fill with color once more.

“Hohoho.” I gave my best high-pitched, in-your-face laugh.

“D-Don’t mock me!” she erupted like an angry volcano. “I didn’t ask you to do that for me! This is our decisive first contest! You don’t even know how to play! You must be joking! Ah, this isn’t the time for this!” She grabbed the

sheet music as she spoke and danced her fingers across the keys as if warming up.

Wonderful—this was the brazen Aritomo I knew.

I had utilized the same tactic Shimosuru had the other day when he had been attempting to spur Aritomo on. Clearly this was the best method to use with her.

Incidentally, I tried imitating the villainesses from the books Kirara lent me. Did I pull off the laugh and the goading? Regardless, now that Aritomo motivated again, I spoke to Shimosuru.

“I’m glad to see Aritomo’s back to her usual self.”

“Yeah... My *confidence*, on the other hand, is still in tatters, heh.”

Hmm, those affection-point increases Aritomo had earned with Shimosuru had gone right back down, it seemed.

With Mikazuki finally joining us in the music room and Aritomo’s nerves calmed, she had resumed that usual proud, competitive smile.

“Well, shall we get started? Ui, you’re the judge this time around. Go ahead.”

“Right, leave it to me.”

Shimosuru also seemed to be running this round as advisor, so our judge, Mikazuki, took a seat in the chair to the right of the stage.

“Now hold on, how am I supposed to see her play from here?” Mikazuki grumbled. Exasperated, Shimosuru shrugged.

“You can hear the piano best from there. You’re on judging duty today, so this is no time for slacking. Listen. No sleeping allowed.”

Everyone but Aritomo and I nodded in agreement. I understood that to mean Mikazuki really had no interest in the artistic merits of this performance.

“Shizuku Aritomo, playing Mozart’s Twelve Variations on ‘Ah vous dirai-je, Maman.’”

Aritomo gave a bow as Shimozuru introduced her. She lowered her head a little too much. A proper lady never bows too deeply. There is a thin line that distinguishes the perfect amount of elegance and courtesy.

This was one piece of etiquette we would need to work on before the next challenge.

With a sigh, the first bars of Twelve Variations began to fill the room.

Following the familiar sound of “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” was a melody with a light, buoyant quality. It was sweet and surprisingly fitting for Aritomo.

She only played an excerpt of around six minutes, as advised by Shimozuru to keep Mikazuki from getting bored, but she played every note quite well. Even Mikazuki had sat up and was giving her his undivided attention.

I noticed that Mochizuki looked as if he had something to say, but Shimozuru ignored him in favor of giving Lady Chouko’s introduction.

“Chouko Tsukuyomi, playing Debussy’s ‘Clair de lune.’”

The soft, tender, and loving way she played the song wove images of the enchanting moonlight illuminating the stillness of the depths of night in my mind.

Those rays of moonlight seemed to gather into a single spotlight that lit up Lady Chouko as she played.

That beautiful performance was the moonlight itself.

Once the last traces of the final note faded away, she rose and finally allowed her face to soften into a grin, her eyes meeting mine.

“I’m going to play for you.”

I began to tremble again, just as I had the first time she said it.

Had she really played such a beautiful song just for me? I was happy. A little embarrassed...but happy.

The heat of the moment spread like fire in my chest. What was this warm, almost constricting feeling?

The vigorous clapping all around me roused me from my daze.

“Well, looks like that settles it,” Mochizuki’s voice boomed as he applauded. “There’s no contest here. Let’s put this ridiculous farce to rest.”

Aritomo stiffened upon hearing his cold words.

Clearly, Lady Chouko was the winner on skill alone, and the emotional depth of her piece was equally unmatched. Everyone present could agree on that.

Even so, no one else seemed willing to say it. After seeing how much effort both parties had put into it, no one seemed keen to disparage either musician.

Lady Chouko fixed Mochizuki with a reproachful look.

I made sure to maintain my composure as I approached him.

“I still haven’t performed my piece. I expect you to give it due consideration.”

My words punctuating the silence following Mochizuki’s insults, I made my way over to the grand piano.

After a subtle bow, I adjusted the seat and gave Shimozuru the signal.

It was my turn now.

“...Urara Tendou, uh...your performance piece, please?”

Ah yes. In the beginning, I intended to select a song they would all know, but partway through, I decided instead to play them something I knew well from my past life.

““V-Vernal Birdsong.””

I was going to perform for them a much beloved piece from my past life.

Beautiful is the vernal ballad of a solo bird,
Rich and sonorous like the rays of the sun,
Oh, come to me, my lady fair,
That our melodies may forever be as one.

Beautiful is the vernal ballad of a pair of birds,

Soft and gentle like the cooling breeze,
How my heart yearns, fair lady,
For you to come and sing once more with me.

The second the final note resounded, I was overcome with a gentle, warm feeling.

Lady Chouko! Hugging me from behind like that is unfair!

"What a lovely ballad, Urara," she whispered in my ear, completely disregarding how flustered I was and only embarrassing me further.

But in truth, I had sung. Without even realizing I was doing it.

"It was beautiful. But I've never heard a language like that before. Where is that song from?" Izayoi asked, his words surprisingly direct.

Apparently I had sung in Lacrofinian. This was bad.

"Well...I heard it a long time ago...I actually don't know where it's from..."

There was no other way to explain it. My only option was to try to laugh it off, so I gave them an innocent smile.

"It actually sounded like...Finnish? Maybe? But that wasn't it," Izayoi mused.

"Hey! I thought this was a piano contest. No singing!"

With the proverbial gavel unceremoniously dropped, the room fell silent.

Everyone seemed to find my song oddly charming, but Mochizuki's judgment seemed completely fair.

I apologized and started to play again, but Lady Chouko hugged me tighter. I had forgotten she was embracing me.

"Mitsuru, relax. You aren't the judge this time anyway."

My ears were still burning, but that voice reverberated coldly within them. For the first time I realized how frightening Lady Chouko could be when she was angry.

"U-Ui! What do you think? You've got to pick Tsukuyomi, yeah?"

Mochizuki was frantically trying to turn this on Mikazuki after he incurred Lady Chouko's ire. Well, he had every right to look elsewhere for assistance, even if it made him appear a little pitif— No, never mind. It's not nice to think that way.

"Hmm, Chouko was good, but...that first song was interesting. I think that might win it for me. And it was one I actually knew." With that addendum, Mikazuki gestured toward Aritomo.

Well, well, well. I'm not sure what to call something like this. A reverse grand slam, was it? It looked like Shimozuru's advice was spot on.

Mochizuki's face twisted when he heard Mikazuki's decision. He almost looked as if he would cry.

"Ui, you idiot!" he shouted. "Traitor! I don't know you anymore!"

...He sounded like a spoiled child throwing a fit.

He slammed the door to the music room on his way out. Sighs echoed throughout the room.

"Huh. Looks like I angered him."

"Don't tick him off like that. He gets so annoying."

"Just leave him. He'll forget all about it by tomorrow."

"He doesn't have many friends, so he really is the one I feel sorry for here."

He certainly didn't seem like the prince Aritomo made him out to be. I peered at her, wondering what she thought of his behavior.

"...Huh, that was weird."

Yes, it was.

We had all forgotten in the wake of the Prince's outburst, but Aritomo had won the first round of the Ojousama Challenge.

She had used an underhanded tactic, to be sure, but that was why we were given an advisor to begin with. Shimozuru looked proud. After all, Lady Chouko and the others had all agreed to let us have an advisor in the first place.

“Now, who will be the judge and advisor for the second round?”

The peaceful atmosphere that had returned to the music room grew tense again as soon as I asked that question.

“I will be the judge,” Shinmyou said with a wry grin, his arms folded at his chest. I could tell his expression grew more exasperated every time he saw my face. It seemed at this point that wry grins were all he was capable of in our presence.

“Right, and Mochizuki will be the advisor.”

Meaning the advisor himself might be the challenge this time around.

It was likely best not to expect any help from him. However, it didn’t feel right to ignore him, either.

Aritomo appeared to be deep in thought; then, hesitantly, she looked to the others.

“Would it be all right to set the next challenge for after the holiday? So about ten days from now? If Mochizuki is our advisor, I want to hear what he has to say... I mean, I’m sure he has plenty of good advice, if only we catch him when he’s more willing to share.”

Her wording was apt.

Shimozuru had warned us that our advisor might help us, offer minor or confusing suggestions, or offer nothing at all. It depended on the person.

It put the burden on us to talk with them, get to know them and have them accept us, and hopefully that would yield genuine advice. It was a matter of mutual understanding and genuine respect. All this required interaction seemed fitting if this really was the otome game world that Aritomo insisted it was.

At least, that was how I saw it. Could that have been why Lady Chouko chose to give us advisors to start with? Not just to aid us in winning the contest, but as a proactive means of bringing us into their circle of friends? In that case,

we really would need to put the time and effort into getting Mochizuki to come around.

“Good point. However, after midterms, my free time will be limited, as I will be preparing for the school festival with the student council, so I would like to finish this before then,” Shinmyou said apologetically.

He was the student council president, after all. Our midterms were in the middle of May, and our school festival would be at the beginning of June. Also, if I wanted to keep my scholarship, I needed to maintain my position as the student with the third-highest test scores in my grade.

“Sounds good.” I nodded once.

Time to work hard!

(((

“I couldn’t catch the Prince...” Aritomo had decided we needed to talk immediately after our school break ended. “I even followed him all the way to Spain...”

It was good to see Aritomo was the same combination of a cute face and absolutely devious thoughts lurking within as ever.

How had she known where he was staying over the long holiday? It was a little frightening.

“I just listened in on Oboro talking about their plans. If I hadn’t, he never would have let me know.”

“Ahaha, sorry, but it wouldn’t have been fair if I had told you.”

Why was Shimosuru here? He wasn’t part of this. And he was being as tight-lipped as expected. He was happy to chat with us, but advice was off-limits.

“I almost had him in Madrid, but he slipped away. After that, I just got the urge to go swimming in Hawaii instead.”

That would explain the sunburn, then.

"Here, I brought you a souvenir," she said, handing me a box of chocolate macadamia nuts.

"Thank you very much. These look delicious."

"Anyway, I was lying in wait in front of the second-years' classrooms, but I just barely missed him again. At this rate, I'll never get him to talk to us."

Pouting, she tore the wrapping paper off the macadamia nuts she had given me and popped one in her mouth.

I thought those were for me...

"He's no prince. He's a ninja. What's his deal? Maybe he's a ninja prince?"

"Giving people the slip is the only thing Mitsuru does better than Chouko."

Shimozuru followed Aritomo's lead and popped a macadamia nut in his mouth. My gift was disappearing right before my eyes.

Hearing Lady Chouko's name mentioned was the one thing that could take my mind off the waning treats.

"Um...do you think it's because Mochizuki is in love with Chouko?" I decided to be bold and ask.

"Pbfff!" Shimozuru choked on the macadamia nut, inevitably coughing it up.

"Cough...cough... Wh... No...th-there's no way. Ahh, you're gonna make me choke to death...!"

I didn't realize my question was so funny.

"No, uh, I mean, I guess I can understand why you would think that after seeing how he acts around her."

"I don't know if it's because he's stubborn or what, but he's decided that Chouko Tsukuyomi comes in first no matter what."

Exactly. The appearance of any opposition to Lady Chouko seemed to strike a nerve with him. That was why I suspected he liked her.

"Uh, Tendou? Do not ever tell either of them what you just said to me. They'll both lose their minds."

So it was that serious? That only made me more curious about their relationship.

Tugging nervously on his wispy locks, Shimosuru continued, "Listen, Mitsuru sees her as a friend. It's just that the Mochizuki and Tsukuyomi families have a complex relationship. Their fates, even their very identities, are intertwined. It's been that way since they were born, and it's caused them both a lot of pain. So please just try to understand," he requested with a wink. He seemed to really care about his friends.

Meanwhile, something sinister flickered in Aritomo's eyes as she watched him.

I felt bad that her affection with him seemed to be constantly decreasing, but after hearing that the Prince and Lady Chouko were just friends, it seemed she was once again determined to win Mochizuki's love.

"Well, I think I have an idea of how to catch Mochizuki. Aritomo, would you accompany me?"

"Huh? Where?"

I led Aritomo out the door and to the classroom three doors down, where Lady Chouko was.

"So? Why are we here?"

"For a little girl talk. Right, Chouko?"

"Yes, so it would seem."

I had my lovely souvenirs with me, so it seemed a perfect time to build some goodwill.

"I'm so happy you've come to spend time with me, Urara."

Lady Chouko's lovely lips lifted into an affable smile as she welcomed me. As happy as she seemed to see me, I was even happier to see her after so long.

"How was your break? Aritomo apparently visited Hawaii."

As I spoke, I handed her the half-empty box of chocolates. I felt it was rude to offer her something that had

already been partially eaten, but she was undeterred. She took one and popped it in her mouth with a "Thank you."

"I spent all my time studying. How was your break, Urara?"

"The only thing I did of note was go shopping with my little sister. There were crowds everywhere."

"Hawaii was just as bad. People everywhere."

"Really? Hahahaha."

The three of us giggled. We really did look like a group of girl friends.

"Wait a second! I thought we were here to help me figure out how to catch the Prince."

Aritomo had snapped back to reality. Too bad, I really did like this better, all three of us chatting away happily.

"Chouko, how many times a day do you see Mochizuki?" I asked.

"Let's see, probably about three or four times during school hours."

"That's a lot, considering you're both in different grades..." Aritomo said.

It was. Come to think of it, just about every time I ran into Lady Chouko, she was with Mochizuki. I hadn't realized it until then, as we were in different classes, but it seemed likely that, at almost every break, Mochizuki came to see Lady Chouko.

I offered up my deduction and Aritomo seemed to agree. Lady Chouko had a slightly sour look on her face, a rarity for her.

"So maybe if I hang around you, Chouko Tsukuyomi, I might be able to get the Prince to warm to me," Aritomo concluded. "That seems much easier than running myself ragged chasing him around all day."

He had been downgraded from ninja to cockroach. I certainly was curious to understand just who this Prince was supposed to be.

“Very well, then—I shall be careful not to see Mitsuru outside of school.”

“Wait, are you certain, Chouko?”

This was about us. That shouldn’t mean Lady Chouko had to cut off contact with him. I ran my fingers through my hair as I told her as much.

“Oh, well, in that case, perhaps you and I can spend more time together instead, Urara? I would like that better than spending time with him anyway,” she said, patting my head. My cheeks flushed.

I tried to pretend I hadn’t heard her say, “Who cares about Mitsuru anyway.”

(((

TIME was not a luxury we had in abundance, and I had no desire to draw all this out, so we hatched a plan and finally managed to nab the Prince the next day after school.

“...I’ve always thought Mitsuru lacked perseverance,” Lady Chouko said, sounding annoyed.

“I agree. But that just means you two have a better chance of success, Aritomo, Tendou,” Shimosuru said, clearly enjoying himself.

“Shut up. I’m only here to get this all over with,” Mochizuki replied spitefully. “Just ask me whatever you want. I decide whether I’ll answer or not.”

He looked as if he’d swallowed a bug.

He locked eyes with Aritomo. No matter what she asked him, he was unlikely to say anything that could impede Lady Chouko’s chance of success. Even if she herself allowed it.

“You must really love Lady Chouko, Mochizuki,” I remarked.

It was only us left in the empty classroom, but gasps echoed throughout the room.

“Wait... Tendou, stop! No! Don’t go there!”

“Ha?! Say what?!”

“...Tch.”

Mochizuki clicked his tongue in annoyance, but that wasn't what I had intended.

“I simply meant you value each other as treasured friends.”

After all, they had been together since childhood. Clearly, they had a bond deeper than we could understand.

“That's why we don't want to force you to give us advice. But won't you at least do us the courtesy of acknowledging us, since you are supposed to be our advisor?” I looked at Aritomo as I spoke, and she nodded.

“Yes, please.”

Aritomo and I bowed in unison.

If he didn't want to give us advice, we needed to respect his wishes. That was what we had decided. We simply wanted to tell him that face-to-face, a feat that had been difficult enough, but somehow we had accomplished our mission.

Mochizuki seemed taken aback, the vitriol in his face subsiding. We had worn him down a bit, and that was more than enough.

We excused ourselves. Just as we were making our way out of the classroom, he sullenly called after us.

“Let me give you one piece of advice...,” Mochizuki said, averting his red-rimmed eyes.

I glanced at Aritomo and saw her eyes were shimmering with hope.

A hope that was quickly dashed.

“Just give up this round. Forfeit.”

...What sort of advice was that?

“Um, uh, what exactly do you want us to infer from that?”

“There's nothing to infer. I said what I meant. Just give up this round.”

That was all. He informed the others he was leaving and disappeared.

Completely baffled, Aritomo and I stood frozen in shock. His words lingered in our ears.

"Ahh...I should have known that was the only kind of advice Mitsuru would be willing to give. That was wild."

"It appears he gave you both something to think about."

Had Lady Chouko and Shimozuru interpreted that as guidance? Clearly, my very concept of what constituted advice had been challenged.

Seeing my expression of dissatisfaction, Shimozuru quickly added, "I'm not your advisor, but I think that was the biggest concession he was willing to make. It's up to you two to figure it out."

How could we make good use of advice like that? Figuring that out was going to be a challenge in and of itself.

After that, Aritomo and I headed for the school café, which was still open, to hold a strategy meeting.

Lady Chouko had given me a forlorn look before we left, but I didn't want to trouble her any further, so we parted ways in the classroom.

At any rate, I thought I should at least enjoy a cup of tea while sitting on the terrace. For several moments, I was able to enjoy that usual deliciousness in peace.

"Now then, what should we do?"

"Yes, what indeed?"

Watching Aritomo give a stretch, a thought occurred to me.

"First, I need to ask, Aritomo, do you really think Mochizuki was trying to give us advice?"

"Hmm."

After a beat, she rested her chin in her hands and gave a thoughtful nod.

"Chouko Tsukuyomi may be my rival, but I don't think either of them would try to mislead us...at least, they

probably wouldn't. I just don't get it."

She looked disappointed while speaking about Mochizuki. Was it my imagination? After all, wasn't Mochizuki her main love interest? She shut her eyes and sat like that for a while. I wondered if it was a sign of her inner conflict.

Even so, it seemed Aritomo still considered Mochizuki to be the Prince and her main target.

"You're right. I need to trust the Prince's advice," she said with a note of finality.

"I'll forfeit the next round. It seems a waste, but whatever it takes, I will win the Prince's heart."

That sounded more like her. It was good to see she had returned to her senses, but still, I couldn't help wondering what else was going through her head.

"Now, what to do? I don't think he's *really* asking us to sit this one out."

"Right? I think it means we should pick something she can definitely win."

"Honestly, I think that's true of every round."

"...That's aggravating. I mean, you're right, but..."

Hmm, how could we decide a winner without a direct challenge? This was another vexing riddle. I noticed then two other students sitting in the cafe, studying from reference books.

"Aritomo, what about the exams?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I know. They're coming up fast."

"No, that isn't what I meant. The midterms. Let's use the results of the midterms for the next challenge."

That was how we could decide a victor without a direct challenge.

"Huh? You would let Chouko Tsukuyomi win that? But you're a scholarship student. Would that really be okay?"

I was grateful for her concern but also confused as to why she assumed I alone would be taking the risk, but I decided to leave it be for now. Though, for good measure, I

added that a scholarship student only needed to come in third.

"Oh, Aritomo, you didn't see the notice in the hallway announcing our pretest results?"

"I didn't look. As soon as I got mine, I tore my paper up and tossed it in the trash."

She said something bold about never looking at the past, but we were supposed to get our parents' stamp on the results paper and bring it back. I decided I would wait and give her the *good* news later.

"Chouko got first place on the pretest. She received perfect marks across all five subjects."

"What?!"

"I ranked second, but I can't get anywhere close to her level. I felt so defeated."

"Whoa... That's really rough!"

It would be shocking for any normal person to get perfect marks on such a difficult test, but it seemed par for the course when it came to Lady Chouko.

So it wasn't that Mochizuki wanted us to give up. In fact, we would need to try harder than ever. But in the end, the results would likely be the same. An Ojousama Challenge was a strange enough concept, but certainly knowledge and intellect were appropriate enough to test in such a contest.

"Ah, yeah. In that case, maybe it's better just to give up and not even try this time."

In that case, we wouldn't need to make any special preparations and would have no need for a judge this time. We would just need to wait for the results alone to find out who won. That also meant we wouldn't need to trouble the student council president.

Once that was decided, Aritomo rushed off for the student affairs office to get them to reprint her results form. I made my way to the student council room to inform Shinmyou of our decision.

IT wasn't abnormal to find myself in awe of the magnificent rooms of St. Delia's Academy, and I expected the student council room was no exception.

Several cabinets lined the walls, all of them full of documents. Ordinary folding tables had been set out in a U shape, surrounded by chairs. Surprisingly, it was a completely average student council room setup.

"Are you surprised at how plain it is?" Shinmyou beckoned me in from his seat in the back of the room, surrounded by papers.

"No, I was actually relieved to see such a familiar sight."

"That's right—you're not from the academy. Students who've attended this school their whole lives are always surprised the first time they visit this room. Some even forget what they came for and leave. Like Asahina over here."

He jabbed his thumb toward the vice president, a second-year if I remembered correctly.

"Really? They're that surprised?"

Then again, knowing people like Mochizuki and the others, I could see why.

"Mitsuru insisted on ordering some expensive, exotic furnishings, but I put an end to that."

That was the sort of frivolity I had come to expect from the Prince.

"I only stopped him because we among the student council have a very specific set of standards we subscribe to."

"I see. I suppose it is up to you to uphold such traditions."

He likely had many old-fashioned customs to maintain once he inherited the title of student council president at St. Delia's. It seemed tough.

“Well, were you able to chat with Mitsuru?”

“Yes, and so I have something to tell you.”

“Asahina, give us a moment, will you?” Shinmyou called out to the vice president with a tempered smile. “We’ve a private matter to discuss.”

The vice president gave a silent nod and left the room. Asahina was a tall, muscular boy. He looked as if he would fit in more as the captain of a sports team rather than as a student council member.

Perhaps sensing my impolite stare, the vice president turned back to look at me, his face red. Embarrassed, I quickly introduced myself.

“Please forgive me for intruding during such a busy time. I am Urara Tendou, a first-year.”

“Ah...I’m Shouichi Asahina, a second-year. Please excuse me.”

With that, Asahina quickly disappeared from the student council room. Shinmyou chuckled at the way he ran off so quickly.

“It looks as though I interrupted during something important,” I said, feeling guilty, but Shinmyou merely shrugged it off.

“It’s fine. So, what did you decide?”

“Oh, yes. We’d like to use the results of the midterm exams for the challenge this time, if that’s all right.”

As soon as those words left my mouth, Shinmyou blinked rapidly.

“Was this Oboro’s idea? Or did Chouko say something?” he asked, a spiteful look on his face. “It would be against the rules. Are you sure you’re all right with that?”

His words and tone were prickly.

“Well...yes, it’s all right with us. Neither Chouko nor Shimozuru said anything about this, either.”

The air in the room had grown tense, so I answered quickly in the hopes of being able to leave, but somehow, it seemed Shinmyou was drawing closer and closer to me.

“Really? I wouldn’t have expected Aritomo to agree to a challenge she’ll most assuredly lose.”

“Huh, um...”

“Or was this your idea? If it was, you must have a great deal of confidence in yourself to believe you can best Chouko in test scores.”

Shinmyou had quickly closed in on me, stopping only when he had me up against the cabinet. He lifted a lock of my hair and twisted it around his finger.

He was dripping with sex appeal, and though he spoke with a smile on his lips, there was no hint of mirth in his eyes. Actually, he was a bit frightening.

“Come now, tell me the truth.”

Chills ran up my spine as he whispered in my ear.

“Mochizuki gave us some advice! That was how we came to the decision.”

I was desperate to get away from Shinmyou, so I decided to be forthcoming. However, the moment he heard my answer, his previously light demeanor changed instantly.

“Mitsuru? Impossible.”

He gave a nasally laugh, but his face was serious. My body stiffened, seeing him act a way I had never seen before.

I’m so scared—someone, help. Someone, anybody! Lady Chouko, please!

“Sakutarou, about that stuff with K— Whoa!”

“Shirazu, I told you to knock first. Get that through your head.”

The second the door opened, Shinmyou had pulled away as if nothing had happened and shouted a stern warning at Izayoi.

“Ah, my bad. I saw Asahina earlier, so I figured you were alone. Uh...should I come back later to talk to you about the Chouko thing?” Izayoi sputtered apologetically.

“No, I was just leaving.”

I was so frightened, I had no desire to stay here any longer anyway. As I slipped by Izayoi, I heard Shinmyou snort.

"I'll be sure to tell Chouko the particulars of your challenge. Good luck."

He had for the most part returned to his usual mature self. However, I was sure I would be unable to forget that steely expression he had worn.

Ahh, that truly was terrifying.

(((

EVEN after rechecking the results, the verdict was clear. Lady Chouko was the winner.

She had once again swept all five subjects with perfect marks. There had never been any contest.

Of course, there had been no disputing those results, but still I couldn't help feeling significantly outmatched. And Shinmyou's backhanded "That's too bad" as he looked down his nose at me made me realize that he would be difficult to deal with.

At any rate, the second challenge was finished, and with one win, one loss, I could look ahead to the school festival with my head held high.

While there was a certain incident the day of the school festival, it was of little importance, and the rest of the day was filled with happy memories. In the aftermath of that episode, though, Aritomo earned herself some rather vocal fans and increased popularity. It had very little bearing on the contest, however, so I'll skip over it for now.

"All right, let's begin our strategy meeting for the third challenge."

I responded to the excited Aritomo with a cheery "Okay!" We were sitting in our empty classroom, as per

usual for these meetings.

It was just that, while it was natural for Izayoi to be here, as he was our advisor for the next round, I still couldn't understand why Shimozuru and Lady Chouko were present.

"I'm the judge for the next round."

"And I'm a participant."

"Should you really be here, though?"

"It's no big deal. She would find out later anyway, so what's the harm in her finding out a little early?" Aritomo said.

Lately, she was sounding less like a refined lady and more boyish than ever. Izayoi looked put off by her.

"So, do you have any advice for us to improve our chances of winning this time?"

Even though he was a year older than the rest of us, Izayoi was also the quietest. Putting him on the spot like that felt a little cruel.

"Ah...sorry. Give me a minute to think, please. I'm not exactly good in group conversations like this, especially after being roped into it.."

Roped into it? He was right about that. I felt sorry for being on the side that roped him into it, even though I was in a similar position myself.

"Hmm, but you are here, so you must have some advice to offer," Aritomo urged. Izayoi only answered once his eyes met Lady Chouko's and she nodded her approval.

"It's because Chouko asked me to come. I'll do what I can to help you."

In the beginning, no one wanted anything to do with Aritomo, so the fact that they were slowly warming to her over the course of the contest was a relief. I turned to congratulate Aritomo on making progress with the love interests and saw her lips had pursed into a pout.

"Well, I wasn't expecting much from you, Shirazu, so it's fine. I suppose you really do have trouble with subtleties like this."

When you say things so bluntly like that, it makes it difficult for you to make others like you. No wonder their affection is being raised, I thought, but I kept it to myself. I was done pointing out that she was dashing her chances with her love interests.

Izayoi pushed up his glasses, apparently trying to remain calm, but Shimozuru showed no mercy, as he burst into laughter.

"Pft, so what'll it be? It looks like that's all the advice Shirazu's willing to give, so..."

"Hmm... Well, do you have anything in particular you want to do for the next challenge, Tsukuyomi?"

Are you really going to give the choice to your competitor, Aritomo? Lady Chouko was flabbergasted at the question, but she quickly resumed her usual graceful demeanor.

"Well, what about a cooking contest?" she suggested with a mischievous grin tugging at her lips.

"A cooking contest?" I repeated. "Come to think of it, you mentioned something like that before."

She said my cooking was good and had asked me to feed her that day. Just remembering it made me blush.

"Cooking, huh? I've never really done that outside of school," Aritomo said with disinterest.

"You learned how to cook at school? That's incredible," Lady Chouko said, quickly praising her to fan her interest.

"Huh? You've never cooked in class before? What do you all do here during home ec?" Aritomo asked.

"We learn about the nutrition aspect. Also, we regularly study table manners and etiquette," Shimozuru, said and the other three lifelong academy students nodded in agreement.

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. The children of affluent families were unlikely to cook their own food. Even in my past life in Lacrofine, no matter how poor the

noble, none ever prepared their own food. It seemed that was a universal truth.

“But is that really okay? To do a cooking contest when you have no experience? Well, I’m not one to talk, I suppose.” I actually did appreciate Aritomo’s bluntness.

“It’s fine. I’ve always wanted to try cooking,” Lady Chouko said with great interest. “Ah yes, and as a trade, could I borrow Urara for this round? I’d like her to teach me how.”

She took my hand and gave it a tight squeeze.

“Hm? Oh yeah, that’s fine. I’ll get a pro to teach me,” Aritomo agreed immediately.

So I would be Lady Chouko’s teacher? This was a big responsibility.

(((

“**UH**, ah, um, Chouko...”

“Oh my, another failure.”

Holding up the cucumbers that were shredded like Tanabata wish slips, I began to sense this was going to be an arduous task as I watched Lady Chouko cackle while wielding her knife.

We had decided at the meeting that the third challenge would be a cooking contest, but with only one experienced cook and two novices, I doubted we’d manage anything edible within the time limit.

As a result, we made the theme of this challenge “bento” and chose the last Saturday in June for the date. That way, there were many options and hopefully enough chances to practice that would yield some sort of progress.

I had Lady Chouko start by learning to use a kitchen knife, but...it was frightening and rather dangerous.

I was honestly so afraid that I couldn’t bear to watch, but the prospect of looking away was even more terrifying,

so I had no choice but to observe her.

Keeping an eye on her was a matter of safety.

"Chouko, think 'cat paws.' CAT PAWS!"

"Cat paws? Okay... Oh my, it fell."

"Stop! Here, if you drop the knife, it could be dangerous. You have to stop!"

"How strange. Why do I keep dropping it?"

Amazed, she opened both hands and stared. Her long and careful fingers were lovely, but today, they seemed to be more trouble than anything.

"It takes practice. It's a sharp object, so it's not meant to be easy to handle," I said, hoping to comfort her.

I thought I heard her mutter, "I could wield it just fine if it was a sword," but I must have just been hearing things, right? It must have been a slip of the tongue. Nothing more.

"By the way, Urara, are you sure your family doesn't mind us using your kitchen?"

"No, my mother's working late tonight and my siblings are out at practice, so it's all right."

I never would have expected someone from a family like Chouko's to want to practice in her own home. And unfortunately, the school lacked a kitchen for student use, so I invited her to my house, since I had everything we needed here anyway.

"I'm sure my house must be tiny compared with yours, but I do hope you'll make yourself at home."

Maybe "make yourself at home" was the wrong phrase. We were supposed to be practicing, after all.

Lady Chouko exhaled a small, self-derisive laugh. "Tiny? ...I find it cozy and wonderful. After all, it is your home."

She stood still, her eyes shifting from the kitchen to the dining room, and seeing the look on her face rekindled feelings from my forgotten past life.

It was like a yearning for the world I'd long since left behind. I found those emotions lingered when I looked in Lady Chouko's eyes.

“...Chouko?”

“Oh my, I’m terribly sorry for staring, Urara.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s only that, just now, you looked like—”

—*you were about to cry*. I wanted to comfort her. I turned my face away, ashamed of thinking that way.

“...Ouch!”

“Are you all right?!”

“Yes, I am.”

The second I looked away, the knife Lady Chouko was holding grazed a finger on her left hand. Blood began to blossom on her porcelain skin. I grabbed her finger, desperate to stop the bleeding.

“...Huh? Waiiit!”

A hint of a metallic taste filled my mouth as I gently licked the wound. Lady Chouko’s fingertip turned pink and fidgeted under my tongue, and only then did I realize what I was doing.

“...Ah...!”

I just did it without thinking. I suppose that was rather brazen of me. I pulled away from her finger in a panic and realized her face was so red, it looked as if smoke might shoot out of her ears. Seeing that adorable look on her face made me turn red, too.

“I’m sorry. ...I shouldn’t have done something so rude.”

“No...it was m-my fault. I’m terribly sorry...for worrying you.”

Our faces crimson, the two of us were battling to see who could apologize more, but as we were both completely embarrassed, we ultimately elected to end in a draw.

“Um, I’ll get you a Band-Aid, so please wait here.”

Just as I left the kitchen, I noticed Lady Chouko lifting the finger to her own lips. I was so flustered, I lingered in the hall for a moment.

Somehow, we managed to make it through the rest of our special lesson. After we finished cleaning up, Lady Chouko apologized once more.

"I'm terribly sorry about today and all the effort you put in for me."

"It was no trouble at all. More importantly, I'm so sorry you were injured."

Lady Chouko's pale finger, wrapped in that bandage, looked so painful.

"It was my own fault. Don't worry about it. Let's practice somewhere else starting tomorrow. I'll try to come up with a place."

"I suppose here is too small, then?"

"No. It's not that. It's...just that here..."

Lady Chouko faltered, unable to say what was on her mind.

She was likely ill at ease in the kitchen of a commoner, but I wouldn't force her to admit it.

"I understand. Wherever works for you is fine with me, Chouko."

"Well, see you tomorrow," she said, nodding with relief and heading out to her waiting car.

See you tomorrow.

I let those words linger.

I felt so happy when the realization hit that we would be spending more time together. I was giddy for the rest of the night.

(((

THE morning after the cooking lesson at my house, I found an envelope in my desk. It was from Lady Chouko. She informed me we had permission to use the school kitchen. Since it was normally off-limits save for special occasions, she wasn't sure if it had everything we needed. She added a postscript asking me to go during lunch.

I whispered a silent "Thank you" to her in my heart just as Aritomo and Shimozuru entered the classroom.

The two of them were chatting merrily and seemed in good spirits. The way they seemed so comfortable around one another, they must have patched things up.

“Good morning, Tendou. Any word from Chouko about the location?”

“Mornin’, Urara. How’s Tsukuyomi’s cooking coming along?”

Aritomo had finally stopped calling me by my full name during the school festival. It felt more intimate—and less obnoxious—this way.

“Good morning, Aritomo, Shimosuru. Yes, she mentioned a special school kitchen. I’m going to go make sure it has what we need during lunch.”

“Ohh, I didn’t know we had something like that here. Where is it?” Aritomo asked, peering over my shoulder at the open letter. I shot her a look, warning her not to snoop, but it had little effect.

“Oh, so that’s where it is,” she said with a nod, taking the seat in front of me.

“So? How are her cooking lessons going?”

“...No comment.”

There was no need for me to tell her the truth. We still had two weeks until the next challenge, so there was plenty of time for Lady Chouko to improve without my besmirching her good name.

“Well then, it sounds like this will be an easy victory for me. After all, my cooking teacher said I’m a natural.”

“Chouko is thoroughly studying the skills she needs. Not only that, but I am assisting her this time, so I cannot divulge any details,” I said, not mincing words despite Aritomo’s cheery tone. I didn’t yield even when she pouted.

“Whatever. My teacher told me cooking is an expression of the love in your heart, so I intend to fill my cuisine with every bit of love I’ve got,” she said, adding, “Bet that ice queen Tsukuyomi can’t manage that!”

To be fair, Lady Chouko did come off as cold, but I didn't think that was who she really was inside...or was that just how I wanted to see her?

"Love? So that's what you put in your lunch!" Shimozuru, our judge this time around, said with a jovial laugh. They really were getting quite friendly with one another.

"Hehehe, of course. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Just you wait, Prince!"

I couldn't believe she still hadn't given up on him. Next to me, Shimozuru gave a dry laugh.

"That's how it is, I suppose."

"Yes, I suppose."

I breathed a sigh, watching Shimozuru chatting with Aritomo as she pumped her fist.

At lunchtime, I made my way to the kitchen. Shimozuru offered to accompany me, but I politely declined. He was the judge this time, after all, so I wanted to ensure fairness.

Once I reached the kitchen, tucked away in the school's third building, I was in complete shock at what lay on the other side of that door.

Since it was a kitchen, I naturally expected at least a sink and stove, but I found instead the standard desks and chairs found in any classroom.

My eyes drifted down to the letter, wondering if I truly had the right place. Just then, I heard a familiar voice.

"Hello, Tendou."

"...Shinmyou? What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? I'm the one who told you to come."

Shinmyou was backlit by a south-facing window, which obscured his expression. However, his cold tone was enough to tell me he held no affection for me. A gloom hung about him.

"People like you and Aritomo pop up every now and then," he spat bitterly, "little worms attempting to coil their

way around my friends. You disgust me.”

This wasn’t just simple dislike. It was outright malice.

Perhaps that was the bad feeling I had been getting from him. Either way, I prepared to run. I had no desire for a friendly chat with someone who would fake a letter just to call me out here.

As I began backing away slowly, one eye on him, he laughed wickedly.

“That door won’t open. Go on. Give it a try.”

Spurred by his words, I ran for the door and twisted the knob, but it merely rattled, as if it were stuck. I began to panic. Shinmyou, who had rushed up behind me, seized my left hand.

“Guess it won’t open. Looks like you’re not strong enough,” he said, squeezing me so tight, his nails dug into my wrist.

I winced in pain and looked down to see blood oozing from my wrist. I let out a gasp, and Shinmyou, looking pleased, laughed.

“See, this is what happens when you wander outside where you belong.”

His voice was so cold, it sent shivers through me. I froze in place.

“Chouko has been hurt and humiliated...doing your disgraceful cooking challenge.”

He must have meant Chouko’s injury from the knife yesterday. He was right that I should never have taken my eyes off her when I was supposed to be teaching her. I was the reason she was wounded. I accepted his anger.

However, he did not need to use terms like *disgraceful*. It was natural for anyone to be wary while learning to handle something new, but Lady Chouko had been so diligent. And yet, she had also been so happy, even as she struggled to get it right...

I didn’t care about how he spoke to me or the pain he was causing me. But I would not have him look down on

Lady Chouko like this.

"Oh? I'm impressed you can still look at me so defiantly considering the bind you're in," he said with a hint of incredulity.

"Chouko is enjoying herself. She doesn't think cooking is disgraceful. She's giving it her all..." I said. I didn't care what he thought of me.

"Is it something worth getting hurt over?"

His voice stung like ice. In that same instant, he tightened his grip on me.

It hurt, but I gritted my teeth and bore that pain. I refused to let him see any weakness in me.

It wasn't about me. I couldn't let Lady Chouko down.

"Chouko is heir to the Tsukuyomi name. She does not have the time to waste on something so low-brow."

The implications of his words were clear. The Tsukuyomi family was the top of the top, even among the affluent families of St. Delia's.

That meant Lady Chouko would always be subject to public scrutiny as befitting her family status.

"That's why I was utterly shocked she accepted such a ridiculous challenge."

"Then why...why didn't you object from the start?"

Of Aritomo's five love interests, Shinmyou seemed to be her least favorite. He wasn't frank like Mochizuki, nor did he have a sense of humor like Shimosuru and Mikazuki. He couldn't even offer his deepest introspections the quiet way Izayoi could.

"Object to Chouko? How naïve! The words of the Mochizukis and the Tsukuyomis are absolute. There's no way I could look them in the eye and argue with them. Though I did go against Mitsuru," he muttered regretfully, tightening his grip. "That's why I want the two of you to tell Chouko. To put an end to this farce."

He twisted my arm as he spoke, making the meaning behind his words clear: don't come near her ever again.

“...Please, let me go, Shinmyou!”

“Do you promise?”

“...No, I won’t!”

“You’ve certainly exceeded my expectations.” His voice grew even colder at my response, as if he were becoming tired of all this.

His displeasure was palpable. He began pulling my arm upward. It felt as if he had snapped a tendon in it. I found myself thinking—dispassionately, as if it were happening to someone else—that this was going to really hurt later. Just then, with a loud *BAM*, the air in the room completely changed.

The door, which I had been unable to open, was now ajar. Despite the odd way my body was contorted, I was able to turn back to see Lady Chouko standing there.

“Urara...!”

“Lady...Chouko...”

Her lovely face was twisted in a way that was painful to see. Even though I was happy she had come to my rescue, I couldn’t bear to look at her.

“Saku...you bastard!” she spat in a low voice unlike her usual lilt. Hearing how frigid it was made me flinch.



Even so, Shinmyou seemed unconcerned, releasing my arm and giving a casual response.

“What is it, Chouko? Did you need something?”

His voice was completely different from the tone he had been using with me up to that moment. He had reverted back to the student council president everyone else knew.

Ignoring his question, Lady Chouko came over to me, asking if I was all right, even as I realized her right hand was bleeding.

Had she gotten that injury trying to break down the door? Seeing the worried look on my face, she tilted her head.

“That’s not my blood,” she said gently, stepping between me and Shinmyou, her eyes narrowed on him with contempt.

She grabbed him with her right hand.

Blood dripped onto the breast of his uniform.

“You’re out of chances. Get lost.”

Hearing her clipped, terse words, he shrugged and, unresisting, turned to go.

Just before departing, he whispered something in her ear, but I was unable to hear what he said.

Passing by me, he muttered a quick, empty “Sorry” with a chilling smile.

But I wasn’t going to let him get the better of me. I stood with my head held high and returned the look.

In that instant, his eyebrows flew up, as if in shock; then he returned to his normal imperceptible self before disappearing.

And then—

“Urara...”

The moment I heard Lady Chouko’s worried voice, my legs buckled and I fell to the ground.

Sakutarou Shinmyou’s Discontent

I researched the name of that student Chouko had become taken with on the first day of school.

She was a scholarship student by the name of Urara Tendou.

It was a family name I had never heard of. Clearly, she was not one of us. I thought perhaps my research would reveal she had been abroad all these years. However, I can say with confidence that was not the case. She was a born and bred commoner. I have no desire to associate myself with such people. Even so, of all the divisions of the academy, the high school has the most students from outside, which only leads to more trouble for the rest of us.

That Aritomo girl, of the family that owns ATN Solutions, is a prime example.

Even before the entrance ceremony, I heard she had been stalking us for her own purposes. That's why we attempted to ignore her, but she went and embroiled Chouko in this ridiculous "Ojousama Challenge."

"What can we do? Chouko agreed to it," Shirazu said with a look of resignation, but he didn't seem to care much in the first place.

I suspect this Urara Tendou girl is the reason we've all been dragged into this.

Even though she's nothing more than a commoner, she acts like anything but.

"Urara Tendou isn't just pretending to be genteel; her every action reflects it," Oboro said with a smile. He had been truly taken with her.

I couldn't exactly disagree with him. Though she was still lacking in many areas, she certainly carried herself with a great deal of refinement.

On the other hand, one's behavior alone could not erase their common birth nor upbringing. If she would just admit to whatever ridiculous ploy she's trying to embroil Chouko and Mitsuru in, I might be able to accept her.

I have no idea whether Chouko is aware of my concerns. She has been getting closer and closer to Urara Tendou, though.

I have never heard Chouko come out and ask someone else to be her friend in all the years I have known her. A line had to be drawn when it came to acquaintances and other relationships, to protect the secrets of Chouko's identity, and she had never once crossed that line.

No, I realize now there was one exception.

Back then, when Kogetsu was on the verge of breaking down, angry at being forced to live as Chouko.

It was then when he began slipping off to practice kendo in secret, as a way of blowing off steam away from the Tsukuyomi family. There, he found and bonded with one person in particular.

I believe his name was Haruto.

Haruto...Tendou.

Now I see. That has to be the connection.

I don't know the details. And there's no way Chouko will tell me. However, something must have happened between them.

After they met, he suddenly sealed away Kogetsu and completely transformed himself into Chouko. It must have been because of that meeting. In that case, the reason we have our Chouko must be because of her. However, that is a different discussion altogether.

Chouko is a Tsukuyomi, and the Tsukuyomi name rests on her shoulders.

I've had this drilled into me since childhood. Our sole purpose in life is to ensure the Mochizukis and Tsukuyomis see continued success. It is the destiny I have inherited.

Perhaps it sounds old-fashioned, but in a way, I exist for the Mochizukis and the Tsukuyomis. That's why—

"Because of that, you two have to tell Chouko. Tell her this whole farce is over."

I tried to cajole Urara Tendou, beg her, even literally twist her arm. I didn't want to be so blunt, but I had little choice.

During that last challenge, when I was forced to serve as judge, I had intended to put a stop to all of this, but that opportunity had been stolen right out from under me.

That was because of Mitsuru's machinations, which meant I could no longer operate in the open. That's why I took the opportunity to call Tendou out in secret and have a talk with her.

"Do you promise?"

"...No, I won't!"

The way she defied me so bluntly pissed me off.

It was less her unexpected response, though, and more that look in her eyes.

How could a girl put in her situation still have so much fight left in her? So, to try to push her over the edge, I pulled her arm up further.

That was when I heard that loud sound and Chouko charged at me, trying to get her away. She was so agitated, her usual calm nowhere to be found.

It seemed my time was up, so I released all the rage that had engulfed me.

"What's going on, Chouko? Did you need something?" I asked, feigning innocence while letting Urara Tendou's arm go. I realized, quite dispassionately, how bad her scars would be and how pitiful she looked.

Chouko's normally composed face was terrifying, even as she remained silent. In that moment, I realized she was at her most frightening when she was expressionless.

Chouko drew closer, that empty look on her face, then smeared the blood on her hand all over my school uniform.

I didn't see any open wound on her hand, so I assumed this must have been Asahina's blood. I'd put him on lookout for me. I would need to remember how useless he was

despite his physical strength. Well, there was no way he could have ever beat Chouko anyway.

I silently acquiesced to her command for me to “get lost.” Of course I had no choice but to obey her.

However, feeling a bit mischievous, I approached Chouko and whispered in her ear.

“*Kogetsu*, your Chouko mask is slipping.”

I could hear her grinding her teeth. Apparently, she hadn’t noticed. I then turned to the Tendou girl.

“Sorry.”

My eyes naturally gravitated back to her, though I didn’t mean to look, and I was met with a strong woman who held her head high as if nothing had happened between us.

I knew it. She rubs me the wrong way.

This Urara Tendou girl is unlike anyone I’ve ever dealt with. Normal tactics didn’t work on her. I swallowed my disgust and stepped into the hall, where Asahina sat, pitifully nursing his face. I ignored him and walked on.

I absolutely will not give up.

I’m sure Chouko will be keeping an eye on me for the time being, but the moment will come when she lets her guard down.

I merely need to wait her out.

Chapter 4: The Lady and the White Roses

I was lost amid a sea of billowing purple veil-like curtains. As I struggled to push through them, they merely fluttered about in front of me. The longer I remained there, the harder it became to remember where I had come from in the first place.

Somewhere in the distance, perhaps in the land of the conscious, I could hear someone crying out, sobbing in lamentation.

It was so sad and heartbroken. I longed to let the person know I was okay, but my voice wouldn't reach them.

Someone, please te...not to cry... Please, don't cry...

My eyes fluttered open, as if someone had flipped a switch. It was so disorienting, leaving me unable to tell what was the dream and what was reality.

As I gazed up at the ceiling, I heard a sigh of relief as Lady Chouko's wide eyes moved into view.

"Urara... I'm so...relieved," she said, her brows wrinkling as she hesitantly touched my cheek.

There was no need to make such a fuss over me. I couldn't seem to get the words out, so I tried to reassure her by placing my hand over hers. But when I did, pain shot through my shoulder.

"...!"

"Don't push yourself... He twisted it horribly..."

That was right. I remembered then, about being stubborn and holding my ground against Shinmyou.

As I glanced down at my injured left arm, the scent of the poultice that had been applied to my shoulder filled my

nostrils. My whole arm, right down to the wrist, had been wrapped in bandages, so I couldn't bend it.

"Isn't this a bit much?" I asked jokingly.

Lady Chouko, seated next to me, helped me into a sitting position. Leaning against the headboard, I could hear Izayoi's voice thanking someone for the help.

I finally realized this wasn't the nurse's office at school. The nurse's office at St. Delia's was magnificent, especially compared with one at a normal school, but this stunning room put even the academy's to shame. I remembered hearing that Izayoi's family owned a hospital, so this must have been that hospital.

"His hand and nails left a nasty mark on your wrist. Luckily, your shoulder and joints weren't damaged, but you still need to take it easy."

"...Oh, it's not that bad," I said, touching my wrist with the opposite hand.

"It is bad. I can't believe Sakutarou would do such a thing, but that doesn't change what happened," Izayoi said, his face sullen.

Lady Chouko nodded in agreement. "Urara, I cannot forgive him for harming you."

"Agreed," Izayoi said. "I intend to confront him as well..."

"Please don't!"

I hadn't meant to be so loud. I had definitely shocked the other two.

"The marks will eventually heal, right? I don't want you to trouble yourselves any further over me."

"But..."

I put a finger to Lady Chouko's lips.

"I will be fine. So...don't cry. Tears don't suit you."

As soon as I said those words, Lady Chouko's translucent skin went red, as if she had applied blush; her breathing became ragged; and she balled her hands into fists.

"I'm not crying!" she protested loudly.

She wasn't, huh? I thought someone had been weeping, but perhaps that was rude of me to say. I was about to apologize, but her childish outburst instead made me giggle.

"I've discovered a new side of you today, Chouko."

I've seen her angry, seen her upset, seen her face contorted in pain as if my injury were her own, and seen her look like a child.

Her usual gentle demeanor was always welcome, but witnessing so many other emotions in her, perhaps those that made up her true self, made me happy. Maybe it was inappropriate at a time like this, but I simply couldn't help myself.

Hearing my words, Lady Chouko grabbed her head with both hands and stiffened up.

Perhaps I went too far?

"...What can I say? I never thought I'd see someone get Chouko to act like this," Izayoi said, a mixture of sympathy and resignation in his voice.

The two of them had a hushed exchange I couldn't hear very well, then Izayoi turned to me.

"You really want us to leave Sakutarou be?"

"Yes. It's all right."

I couldn't promise to forget about it. But somehow, I could understand why he did what he did to me.

"If not—"

"Huh?"

"—we wouldn't be able to hold the contest, and I'm sure Aritomo would be very angry with me. And that's much worse."

Izayoi stifled a laugh.

"It's not funny. Aritomo is terrifying when she's angry," I said earnestly, but someone else, near the door, burst into laughter.

"Wow, Urara, you really think I'm that scary?"

Oh? ...Aritomo is here... Somehow I jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Since I had missed all my afternoon classes, Shimozuru and Aritomo had brought my belongings to me. They happened to arrive just as I made that embarrassing statement, leading Shimozuru to start laughing.

The veins in Aritomo's temple bulged in exasperation, but seeing as I was already injured, she elected to let it go for now. Shimozuru, now engulfed in a fit of giggles, was not so lucky.

We elected to lay the blame for my injury on an accident while wandering the deteriorating Building 3. Izayoi departed for the academy to inform Mochizuki. Lady Chouko still didn't seem completely satisfied, but she respected my decision to not make a big deal of it.

With my injury attended to and our stories straight, Lady Chouko and the others insisted on taking me home as a penance for my injuries. I was grateful for their thoughtfulness, but I didn't feel it necessary. I was trying to figure out how to politely refuse, when Aritomo made her own offer.

"I can have our driver take you home. Would that be better?"

"Are you sure?"

"It's no big deal. We're both going the same way, and that way, it won't draw as much attention to you."

She was right. Any one of them would have stood out, but with all three of them in a neighborhood like mine, I could only imagine what the neighbors would think. I gladly accepted Aritomo's request.

Lady Chouko looked dejected, but after all that had happened, she elected not to push the issue.

"Well, I apologize for the trouble, but yes, I'd like to take you up on your offer, Aritomo."

"It's the least I can do. We're in this together," she said with a hint of pride.

...Now that's a strange way to look at it. I'm pretty sure she was the one who dragged me unwillingly into this situation.

Before I could object, she helped me up and took me home.

(((

“SO? What about yesterday? Did you send them back?”

“...You mean the flowers?”

“Flowers? What flowers, Urara?”

As I was hesitant to use the school's kitchen, Aritomo had offered me a place to teach Lady Chouko to cook.

That was how I ended up teaching Lady Chouko to use a kitchen knife in one corner of the cooking studio where Aritomo was learning to cook, but she took the opportunity to talk to me instead.

To be fair, it did seem rather lonely to be cooking all by herself in a place this big. Her teacher was an Italian chef who spoke little Japanese.

The instructor was able to offer words of praise fairly easily but was not as adept at explaining the minute details of cooking.

I wondered why she hadn't chosen a Japanese teacher, especially since the theme was bento.

But, more importantly, the flowers...

“The flowers Saku sent her!” Aritomo exclaimed. “The delivery person showed up right when we dropped her off! A huge bouquet of yellow lilies!”

I had received flowers. They were from Shinmyou and said “My apologies” on the message card.

“And after he's the one who hurt you. Then he goes and sends that big bouquet to your tiny house to suffocate you with the smell. It would just make me hate him more,” she huffed.

Tiny house? I guess for the people who attend this school, it is, but I wish she would sugarcoat her thoughts a little more on that subject.

"I put them in a vase for my family to enjoy. The flowers did nothing wrong."

Even if I did put them in our altar room.

My late grandmother loved such flashy sentiments, so I'm sure she'll enjoy them.

However, I turned my attention to the silent Lady Chouko in hopes of ending the discussion, just in time to see her cut a carrot clean in half with a loud *thud*.

"Are you all right?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I suppose I pressed down a little too hard."

She cut an extra-large carrot clean in half by pressing just a little too hard? I looked from the carrot to Lady Chouko's face and could hear Aritomo laughing from behind me.

"Tsukuyomi, you're pretty strong."

"You think so?"

She always gave off the air of someone who had never lifted anything heavier than chopsticks, and yet she seemed hale enough to take on any sport.

"Yesterday was incredible. Charging the vice president and knocking him on his— Ahh, waii— Ahh, er... All right, I better get back to practicing," Aritomo suddenly said, scurrying off to her own area.

"Knoc...knock what? Chouko, what happened yesterday?" I asked, tilting my head.

"Nothing. Now come on, let's get back to it. What should we do now?" Chouko flashed me her usual smile before asking me about the next steps. She was right of course. Our time was limited; we needed to make the best of it. I explained to her how to peel the carrot while watching carefully to be sure.

To be sure she didn't injure herself.

Shirazu Izayoi's Sentiments

THE first time I met them in the waiting room of my father's clinic, I remember being overcome by how lovely the girl sitting quietly in the corner was. With her large eyes, her porcelain skin, and her silky black hair, she was like a beautiful doll.

They were all close in age to me, so I introduced myself, but when I at last reached the girl and told her how pretty I thought she was, she shouted back, "Shut up, creep!" I was quite shocked.

Mitsuru and Ui have always teased me about that day.

But I'm not sure whether one can help telling someone so beautiful that they are, in fact, beautiful.

I talked to Sakutarou about it a long time ago, but he told me with a wry grin that Mitsuru and Ui were "little boys; they wouldn't understand."

"Anyway, Chouko is beautiful, it's true. You weren't wrong," he said, resting a hand on my shoulder in commiseration. He was only a year older than I, but I felt as if he was the one I could count on above anyone else.

"Oboro's favorite food?"

"Yes, do you know what it is?"

Aritomo had called me to the cooking studio they were using to ask my advice.

"And bonus points if it's something Tsukuyomi doesn't know about."

I cocked my head to the side. Despite his friendly demeanor, Oboro wasn't exactly an open book.

He wasn't the type to assert his likes and dislikes the way Mitsuru or Ui would, so coming up with an answer was difficult... In fact, there was only one thing I could think of.

"I'm not sure what he does like, but I know he doesn't really care for sweets."

I've never seen him bring sweets for snacks, not even once, since we were kids. In fact, Ui even tried to force him to eat cake and cookies as a sort of joke.

When I told her I had no other preferences to share, she furrowed her brows and spat, "I can't use that! I got that much in my research. He told interviewers that back when he was a child actor. Aww, come on, Shirazu... Oh well. Fine, go do some spying for me! Go on!" she said, shooing me away like she was disappointed in me.

Even if I wanted to spy for her, Chouko and Tendou were cooking in the kitchen on the opposite side of the room, so I couldn't really watch them from the shadows or anything.

As I was trying to figure out exactly how I was supposed to go about "spying," Tendou gave me an elegant smile.

"Thanks for all your help here, Izayoi. Aritomo isn't giving you a hard time, is she?" she asked.

"Oh, no. I think this is just par for the course for her."

Par for the course for her being a pain was what I wanted to say, but found I couldn't bring myself to do it.

"Do you need something, Shirazu?" Chouko asked, the ice in her voice indicating she wasn't happy I was interrupting her time with Tendou.

"No, I just wanted to see how you both were doing."

"As you can see, Chouko is making major improvements," Tendou said with a note of pride, laying out the results of Chouko's efforts. Just as she said, Chouko had come a long way from not even being able to hold a knife. I had to admire her progress.

Seeing Tendou's lovely cheeks blush as she told me how good Chouko's cooking was made my heart thunder in my chest.

"...Ah, right."

I floundered uncomfortably for words. I couldn't seem to think straight when she smiled at me like that.

"Now, Urara, you know that Shirazu is Aritomo's advisor, so no giving anything away," Chouko said to Tendou, her

words gentle, even as the glare she shot my way was ice-cold.

"Y-Yes, you're right. You promised to help Chouko, after all," I said, and I left the studio to get some fresh air.

It was the first time I had ever hesitated to tell someone I thought they were pretty.

As I stood there in soliloquy with myself, my cell phone began to ring. Seeing it was Mikazuki, I answered right away, and he spoke up before I had a chance.

"So?"

"Ui? I don't know how she's managing it, but she's actually teaching Chouko without injury."

"Haha. She really kept her word. My boy Saku's over here being a grouch while doing his student council work."

Because of what happened yesterday, Chouko had no trust left in Sakutarou, so she banned him from coming near them for the foreseeable future. Not only that, but she had charged the rest of us with keeping an eye on him to make sure he didn't mess things up again. Today was Ui's turn, and even though it wasn't part of the job, he felt the need to keep calling me with a report.

"Grouchy? He didn't seem so bad yesterday. Did something happen?"

"He's been cranky ever since all that went down with Chouko. Guy's a total rain cloud. Even before then, he was totally on edge. You never noticed?"

I was shocked at Ui's words. Maybe that was how someone as energetic as him saw Saku.

"Well, you and Saku have always been wound way too tight. Better loosen up, or you won't be able to tell that girl you like how you feel."

"Urk!" My throat was getting tight, and I ended up making a weird sound.

"What, really? You actually noticed your feelings? But I'd put a cork in it and shove them aside. Don't tell her unless you want to die," Ui warned.

“Tell who? I don’t like anyone!” I protested. “And how did we end up on this topic anyway?”

We were supposed to be talking about Sakutarou, so how did we end up fanning out into this nonsense?

Ui continued on, apparently undeterred. “Oh, you haven’t noticed your feelings then? That works just as well. Don’t screw up now. You don’t want to end up like Asahina, do you?”

Laughing, Ui said a quick goodbye and hung up without waiting for me to respond.

Things were getting so out of hand, neither my head nor my heart could keep up. I was so confused and also so jealous of Ui’s ability to flit from one thing to the next like the idiot he was.

(((

“**UMM**...Urara, what’s that?”

“This? Well, we need to pick something to wrap your bento in. Which do you like best?”

“...I have to pick from those...?”

Over the course of our practice for the cooking contest, Lady Chouko had become a much better cook. Which meant it was time to choose what we would make and to practice placing the food in a bento box similar to the one we would use in the final competition.

“You don’t like this one?”

I had brought a spare lunch cloth, but she made a sour face upon seeing it.

...Apparently “Mr. Black-Legged Sloth” wasn’t as popular as I thought. *Well, I still think he’s cute.*

“Uh...hey, Urara! Let’s take our bento and go for a walk.”

She went ahead and used the Black-Legged Sloth wrap. She was likely just trying to make me feel better.

However, there were still so many things to teach her. Did we really have that kind of time?

"You don't have other things you need to do today, Chouko?"

"It'll be fine. I have something I want to show you. Come on, let's go," she said, squeezing my hand. I couldn't turn her down when she put it like that. As we were packing our things, Aritomo whistled at us.

"Woo-hoo! You two going on a date? You must have lots of free time!" She laughed.

"Yes, that's right. We're going on a date. Aritomo, you make sure you cook with lots of love so you can find someone of your own and capture him through his stomach!" Lady Chouko retorted quickly.

"Oh, shut up!" Aritomo fired back with a growl.

Lady Chouko just said this was a date. My face started to turn red.

Her driver took us to a rose garden attached to a Western-style house. It was a surprise to see a rose garden in a residential neighborhood like this, and while it wasn't large enough to be a botanical garden, it was evident that it had received the same amount of care.

I was utterly fascinated by the roses, which were blooming in an array of colors like a painting.

"They're lovely," I muttered, spellbound, completely taken by the flowers.

"It's been chilly lately because of all the rain," Lady Chouko answered gleefully. "I'm so happy we were able to see them in bloom."

Lady Chouko pulled me along, the Black-Legged Sloth bento in her other hand, leading me to a bench under a rose-covered arch.

Looking at that pure-white bench under the arch of lily-white roses felt like being in another world altogether. The leaves were a brilliant, deep emerald, and the white flowers were in thick bloom, one over top of the next, really making

it feel like a painting. This definitely had to be a common spot for weddings and proposals.

“Uh, Chouko...maybe we should sit somewhere else?”

This didn't exactly seem to be an ideal spot for a simple meal.

“Why? We need to sit if we're going to eat, don't we? Come on, Urara, have a seat,” she prodded, taking a handkerchief from her pocket and spreading it out on the bench.

No, no, no way. Even if I was awestruck by the sight of this place, I couldn't bring myself to go so far as to sit on the clean handkerchief she had laid out for me. I wanted to tell her she should sit there, that I would sit on the Black-Legged Sloth cloth, but somehow, I ended up on the handkerchief. Was it magic?

“I hope the food tastes good.”

Watching her slender, pale fingers undo the lunch cloth made me realize we probably should go with a different one. That children's show mascot definitely was not a good fit for someone as elegant as Lady Chouko.

I watched as she lifted something tasty-looking from the lacquerware bento box. Maybe she was going to fare well in the cooking contest after all.

The both of us said a quick “Bon appétit” before tasting the food. After several more bites, it was clear that it was all good.

“Delicious! You're going to do great, Chouko.”

I gazed up at Lady Chouko, amazed at how much she had improved since the beginning and saw her eyes light up as she beamed at me.



That smile was so heartwarming, and right on cue, my heart pounded. My pulse quickened, as if my heart were sounding an alarm.

The descending sun had begun to dye the lily-white roses on the arch. They were picking up a redness not that dissimilar from the red rising in my cheeks.

“Urara...what’s the matter?” Lady Chouko asked, clearly worried about the fact that I was suddenly looking down. It would be all right. I was sure it would, but my head was spinning...

“...I’m sorry. It’s getting late—shall we go?” My answer was more sudden than I expected.

“Well then, we’ll enjoy the rest later,” Lady Chouko said, wrapping the food back up.

She reached out to stop me from leaving and put a hand on the arch. Using a small knife she had brought, she deftly removed one of the white roses.

“Here, Urara.”

“Is it all right to take that...?”

“This is the Tsukuyomi family rose garden, so it’s all right. Take it without another thought about it,” she said, handing me that single white rose.

“Th-Thank you so much...”

Inhaling the sweet smell of that frigidly beautiful rose, I thought I heard Lady Chouko whisper something softly.

“Pardon? What was that, Lady Chouko?”

“Nothing. Urara, do you know what a white rose symbolizes in the language of flowers?”

“Purity...right?”

“Yes, that’s right,” she said with a smile as she walked me to the driver, who would take me home.

Her whispered words—“I am worthy of you”—floated on the wind like the faint scent of white roses, leaving me to wonder if I had even really heard those words at all.

THE last Saturday in June, Lady Chouko and I made our way to the designated location. Due to the rain preventing us from holding our picnic outside that Saturday, at Mochizuki's insistence, we instead borrowed a corner of the café.

There had been no classes that day, which meant we unfortunately had to ask the café to open on their day off. I felt a little guilty.

"Finally, we get to enjoy your cooking," Shimozuru said with a grin even wider than usual.

"Oh, well, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but you won't be having Urara's home cooking today. Mine and Aritomo's will have to do," Lady Chouko responded flippantly.

"Chouko, you're so mean," Shimozuru said, then stuck his tongue out at me. I thought Lady Chouko's cooking would be just fine. Oh, and, uh, Aritomo's too.

"Now then, let's go ahead and start lunch, shall we?" Izayoi said, once everyone but Shinmyou was present.

Shinmyou was not present today, likely because he had been told to stay away from me.

I asked them not to make such a big deal of it, as he was their friend, but Lady Chouko insisted that she couldn't forgive him. Even Mochizuki apologized to me on his behalf, so I felt that really was more than enough, but I couldn't seem to convince her.

"Well, Aritomo, you're up first. Is that all right?"

"Yes. Well, go on. Enjoy," she said, placing a sandwich bento basket for one in front of Shimozuru, who was judging this time, then placing a much larger portion in front of Mochizuki and the others and opening her arms to urge them to eat.

"A panini. And it has salad and fruit as well."

She had prepared a colorful, impressive Italian-style lunch, likely the result of learning from an Italian chef. The panini wasn't filled with merely the standard ham and cheese, but with rich shrimp, avocado, and roast beef. It was stuffed to the brink and delicious.

Mochizuki and Mikazuki seemed to like it, too. Watching them devour theirs was amusing.

"Yeah, this is good," Shimosuru said, turning to Aritomo. A satisfied, bashful grin spread across her face. It was almost cute.

To avoid getting full, Shimosuru moved on to Lady Chouko's lunch after a quick taste of Aritomo's.

Lady Chouko's bento box was wrapped in a cloth with a neat hexagonal pattern. I was thinking about how refined her taste was when she suddenly whispered in my ear:

"Let's leave the...Black-Legged Sloth, was it? For our next private picnic. Hope you don't mind me using this cloth for now."

The way she said it made it sound as if it was our special secret. I was so flustered, I almost fell out of my chair. She giggled mischievously. As she unwrapped a large, multi-tiered bento box for the others, I found myself wanting to get back at her.

"You sure are calm, Chouko," I said, my words falling flat. Perhaps I shouldn't have tried so hard to tease her back, as she made a sour face.

"I'm not calm. I'm actually a bundle of nerves."

With that, she brought the bento over.

I hadn't realized how much she cared about the cooking contest.

After she had passed out everyone's food, I readily apologized for not understanding her feelings, but she merely responded "...I guess you really don't get me after all" in a rough tone that was so unlike her normal delicate speech patterns, it threw me.

Before I had time to puzzle it out, I was distracted by everyone shouting “Bon appétit!”

I wondered if they would like it. At Lady Chouko’s request, we made only items that were popular in the Tendou household, but I worried over whether the foods would suit their palates.

The *onigiri* was a bit ostentatious—covered in salmon and sliced coleseed greens with wakame and small fish—and there was *karaage*, sweet *tamagoyaki*, meatballs, broccoli with sesame sauce, and sliced carrots, all creating a nice balance.

Even on looks alone, there was no comparison with Aritomo’s bento. Perhaps we should have used cross-shaped separators instead? Even though I was Aritomo’s partner, I didn’t want Lady Chouko to lose.

Seemingly concerned about my worried expression, Lady Chouko patted my shoulder.

“It’s all right. It came out very good. And no matter what happens, I was able to learn what your family likes to eat, so I’m quite satisfied.”

It almost sounded as if...

“Oh my, it almost sounds as if you’re trying to marry into my family,” I said with a giggle. Lady Chouko peered at me, her eyes lighting up as if she had just thought of something clever.

“Good idea, Urara. What if I married y...”

“Hey! You two! We’d like to go ahead and announce the results!” Shimozuru cut in loudly before Lady Chouko could finish.

Everyone was glaring at us as if we were holding them up. I apologized but thought I heard someone angrily clicking their tongue next to me. It couldn’t have been Lady Chouko, could it? I was lost in my thoughts as the contest moved on. Before I knew it, it was time for the results.

“And the winner of the cooking challenge is...” he paused, turning to Aritomo. Of course. I clenched my skirt

and looked down.

“Chouko!”

At first, I wasn’t sure I’d heard him right. On top of that, he said he was impressed she had managed to cook so well. My eyes met hers.

“Congratulations, Chouko,” I said, so genuinely happy for her that the words just slipped out. Lady Chouko threw her arms around me without hesitation and squeezed me tight.

“It’s because of you, Urara,” she said in a cheerful tone. I was glad she felt that way, but she was closer than I was comfortable with. Too close. Like, zero centimeters close! I tried to pull away to get some breathing room, but she squeezed me harder.

Just as I was about to ask her to give me some space, Aritomo’s shriek ripped through the café.

“You have got to be kidding!!” She rushed Shimozuru the second the words left her lips. “How? I mean, mine looked more impressive and you all seemed to enjoy it more, right? I’m sure it was better. How could I have lost? After everything you all said!”

She was right; it had appeared an easy win for her. But I wondered how the actual taste was. They all seemed to like it. So perhaps it was an issue of preference?

“And not only that, but Tsukuyomi’s bento was all items Urara always makes! And I know for a fact that Urara only makes sweet *tamagoyaki*. Oboro, I thought you hated sweet things!”

Of course she would recognize my cooking, since she was always snatching food from my lunch.

However, this was the first time I’d heard that Shimozuru didn’t like sweets. After all, there were fruits in Aritomo’s bento, including grapefruit.

...Wait. If he hated sweets, why had he eaten so many chocolate macadamia nuts?

“Huh? Oboro doesn’t hate sweets. You got it backward. He loves ’em. You didn’t know?” Mikazuki cut in, amused.

“Wh-Whaaat?!”

Everyone else looked surprised.

Looking a little sheepish, Shimozuru offered up his confession.

“See, I received and ate so many sweets when I was working as a child actor, I gained a lot of weight. That’s why I starting telling people I didn’t like sweets, but somehow it stuck, and I can’t seem to shake that image people have of me.”

“You were just trying to look cool.”

“You’ve been dealing with that for almost ten years.”

“That’s why I would eat them when I could. You guys didn’t notice?”

“I didn’t think you were eating them by choice. I thought you felt you had to.”

“No wonder people thought you hated them.”

Everyone was talking all at once. I was glad they all seemed to be enjoying themselves, but I wished they would look at Aritomo. She was shaking so violently, I was sure she would explode at any moment.

“...B-B-But...you...sweets... Whatever! It doesn’t matter. But I still can’t buy that Tsukuyomi’s bento was more delicious than mine!”

She certainly had a lot of confidence to refuse so vehemently to accept defeat.

Turning to face Aritomo, Shimozuru maintained his gentle demeanor in spite of his obvious frustration.

“Aritomo, your bento was delicious as well. I really appreciated all your hard work...”

“So then—”

“However, the bread and the fillings for your panini were all store-bought, so you didn’t make it yourself, did you? Now I know it must be hard to prepare so many

different things, but making it yourself was the whole point of this round, wasn't it?"

Aritomo froze. Clearly Shimozuru had guessed right.

"So, it would have been fine if things hadn't turned out perfect, as long as you cooked everything. That's why Chouko, who worked hard on her bento, won this round. I mean, I don't even cook, so you still did more than I ever could," Shimozuru said, scratching his head, a little embarrassed, but his words were sincere.

Aritomo appeared to have accepted his words. And yet...

"B-But my food was much better!" With that, she fled the café, on the verge of tears.

"I'll go talk to her," Shimozuru said, turning to the rest of us.

"Yeah, you do something about her, Oboro. And you! Knock that off!"

It was only then that I realized Lady Chouko was still hugging me. I looked up and realized she seemed a little taller.

"Chouko...is it just me or are you getting taller?"

Lady Chouko immediately released her grip, as if she had only just now become aware of it.

"...Oh my, really? I must be having a growth spurt. Well, since there's still food left, why don't we have some, too?" she said and pulled me over to a seat at Mochizuki's table.

I wasn't entirely sure what was going on, but it would seem I had been completely led astray.

We ate the rest of the lunch with the others. The dishes in Lady Chouko's bento were well done, and even the worst of them were better than my own cooking. I was starting to understand that she was the sort of person who could be perfect at just about anything.

Aritomo's panini bento was delicious as well, but how did Shimozuru figure out it was store-bought?

"This is Eel Olet shrimp, avocado, and roast beef."

"I prefer La Froche, but this works, too."

These were apparently stores catering to the rich and famous. Naturally, they were unfamiliar to me.

"Oboro is also quite the gourmand," Lady Chouko said, trying to raise my spirits. "He's always so picky, I'm surprised I won."

That seemed to be an important thing to know. Was that why she had chosen the cooking challenge? Because she knew that about Shimosuru, as well as—

"Lady Chouko, you knew he actually did like sweet things, didn't you?"

If she had known, that would have put her at an advantage.

"Huh? I had no idea. I thought he hated sweets, just as everyone else did."

Ahh, well, that would mean...

"Hey, does that mean you never planned to win this round?" Mochizuki blurted out exactly what I was thinking. So he felt the same. If she hadn't known, why else would she have included my family's sweet *tamagoyaki* recipe?

"I was not planning to lose. I never throw a challenge."

"Hmph. You don't look like you're trying to win to me," Mochizuki said and turned away.

I didn't think she had tried to throw the round. She had worked hard at improving her cooking. But something was off. Almost as if she was keeping something from me.

I glanced at her. Her face still maintained her calm, cool demeanor, but her body had stiffened a bit at Mochizuki's accusation.

It was at that moment that Shimosuru broke the tension, Aritomo in tow.

"Sorry for making you all wait."

With Shimosuru patting her shoulders to urge her on, Aritomo timidly took her place before us and gave a vigorous bow and an apology in that usually chipper voice of hers.

"I accept my defeat. I'm sorry for the disruption earlier. ...But I will win next time, no matter what!"

She looked straight at Lady Chouko for that last declaration of war. That was every bit the apology I would expect from Aritomo.

"I look forward to it," Lady Chouko replied calmly with a broad smile.

And then, Aritomo continued, "Then let me have Urara back. She's done teaching you to cook, so you shouldn't need her anymore."

"What?"

That was the arrangement from the start, Lady Chouko. You can't be that surprised.

"That is true. They were on the same side to start with."

"She's not yours, Chouko."

"It was just for this round anyway."

"Chouko..."

Everyone chimed in. Perhaps it was because Lady Chouko and I had spent so much time together preparing for this round, but I was supposed to be Aritomo's partner.

"Um, well...Urara?" she called out to me in a panic.

What had happened to the calm that pervaded Lady Chouko's demeanor before?

"Yes, Chouko?"

"Um, well..." I could see she was hesitant. To be honest, I was a little sad I wouldn't get to spend as much time with her as before. But I felt we had to follow the rules, and I just wanted this cloud of gloom in my chest to go away. So...

"You did well this round. Let's all give it everything we've got in the next challenge," I said, bowing to Lady Chouko.

Her shoulders seemed to slump, and she replied with a flat "Right, let's do our best."

She then gave me an elegant curtsy.

Mitsuru Mochizuki's Fears

"HELLO, Mitsuru. Glad to see you're well."

"Been a while. Yeah, not much has changed."

The sight of all those brightly colored dresses, mixed with the blended smell of makeup, perfume, and alcohol, lingered in my nostrils. This scene never changed, in neither prosperous times nor economic failure.

This was how I spent these boring parties, listening to people flatter me or tell me not to be modest. I eventually tried to dodge the endless stream of pleasantries.

This was all a standard part of my social regimen, and I'd been coming since I was little, so I was used to it, but I still found it dull. I looked around, hoping my usual friends were there at least, before electing to hole up in a corner without mingling with the crowd.

"You're all a bunch of buffoons," I said under my breath and clicked my tongue as I finally found them.

"Sorry, Mitsuru."

"If you're really sorry, then come with me. It's not fair you guys are messing around and I'm out here all by myself."

It irritated me that Oboro apologized in word only. He didn't seem very sorry.

"We'd love to, but we're busy ourselves..."

"We can't exactly leave our little Moon Princess to his own devices, now can we?"

Kogetsu was standing there, that sullen look on his face failing to deter all the eyes that were exclusively on him.

That wasn't his usual aloof gaze that merely kept people at a distance. I could feel the anger coming off him.

He heaved a sigh.

That must have been it. Today was the first round of that Ojousama Contest or whatever it was he had gotten himself into.

"Fine, I'll keep an eye on him, so you all get out there."

"Thanks, Mitsuru," Ui said with a resigned shrug, and they all scattered. They had their own responsibilities as sons and heirs to their respective families.

Normally, Kogetsu would be fine on his own, but we had to keep people from getting too close. Clearly, he was having an especially difficult time focusing tonight.

I approached Kogetsu to warn him not to let anyone near.

"Pull it together. Are you going to let everything fall apart over something little like this?"

I doubted that was likely to happen, but I warned him just the same.

"...Don't be ridiculous. Just who do you think you're talking to?" He responded in an icy tone, immediately straightening up.

He was wearing his trademark butterfly kimono, looking stunning as usual, just as one would expect of the perfect Chouko Tsukuyomi. Except...for me, it was different.

"You know...you're my most important friend."

He glanced at me once more with a quizzical look.

"So I'll help you win whatever competition you want, no matter how ridiculous. I just can't stand to see you lose. It hurts, and it makes me mad. But the thing that irritates me most is seeing you take on a challenge you don't intend to win."

"But I did win today..."

"But that was because Oboro picked you over Aritomo for her own good."

For people like us, improving a store-bought lunch the way she did counted as skilled. Oboro only declared her the loser to make her reflect on her actions, as she was clearly aware she had cheated. That was all.

You didn't earn that victory.

Don't look down on Chouko Tsukuyomi. Isn't this the persona you built up? So much so that you stopped using the name Kogetsu?

"I'm sure that girl, Tendou, feels the same? She must have felt uneasy. Wondering why you weren't even trying, so in the end..."

"Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

It had been ages since I had seen him yell like that. Back before taking up the part of the unflappable Chouko Tsukuyomi, back when he was Kogetsu, he would sometimes have outbursts like this. He even stopped having them in our presence... My head ached trying to figure out just how obsessed he was with this Tendou girl.

However, his tantrum had immediately quieted the venue. Shirazu and the others all came charging over to us in a panic. Among them was Saku. I hadn't seen him all day, so I hadn't realized he would be here.

Oh crap. I put my hand to my head, realizing things were going from bad to worse. Kogetsu must have picked up on my tension, as his face soured even further.

"I'm leaving," he said and immediately headed for the door. Oboro saw and chased after him, but to me, it didn't matter.

What mattered now was restoring the festive mood. I couldn't very well tell our guests the outburst was their beloved Chouko Tsukuyomi shouting "Shut up" over and over again. If I did, it would hurt me as well, so I merely gave them a bitter smile.

"I'm sorry, I was the one who upset her. I was bringing up the past...things one shouldn't say to a lady, I suppose."

As soon as I said that, the wheels in my head turned. Just as I anticipated, all the old folks started speaking at once.

"Mitsuru is still so immature."

"Hahaha."

At least the din of the party had returned.

I breathed a sigh of relief as Shirazu and Saku headed my way, hoping for an explanation. I evaded them.

Ui handed me a drink and toasted me for my efforts as I drained it in one go. I was exhausted already.

I'd had my suspicions for a while, but now I was sure.

Kogetsu was in love with Urara Tendou. Probably far deeper and for far longer than I ever realized.

Was this his first love? I had no idea, but if this was the form it took, no wonder it had such a dramatic hold on him. It was unreasonable for him to expect to continue passing as a female like this forever. He was getting taller and his voice was starting to deepen.

But we really only had to wait a little longer.

All I wanted was for him to hang on until the Full Moon Festival.

I begged him, as a friend.

(((

I spent Sunday in a fog of feelings I couldn't seem to sort through.

"I've never seen you dawdle like this before. Are you okay?"

"Mm-hmm. You can have the rest of my food if you want."

I had tried to keep my emotions from showing on my face, but the gloom surrounding me managed to seep through, worrying my family. Kirara was concerned; Haruto bought me snacks.

I felt worthless as an older sister. But...

(((

"SIGH..."

"That's number five!"

"...What is?"

"Five sighs. You've sighed five times since noon."

I hadn't noticed.

However, it was a little embarrassing that anyone would be counting them.

"I'm the one who should be sighing anyway. I lost on Saturday and got Oboro all upset. It wasn't my best moment," Aritomo said before popping a piece of *tamagoyaki* into her mouth.

Ever since she began training for the cooking contest, Aritomo had been using the school lunchroom and the café less and less, instead eating her packed lunch in the classroom with me. It was mostly food prepared by her family's chef, or food that she bought from a store, but her meals were very fancy.

She brought her lunch again today, and this time, it had many of the same items mine did.

"Did you make your lunch yourself today?" I asked, noticing that her food was different from usual, simpler.

Aritomo gave a pout and said, "Yeah, I guess. I mean, I happen to like this style of food and...it's for practice...and okay, maybe I did promise him... Don't say a word!"

What was she talking about? Ah yes...haha, that's right—she promised to make some for Shimozuru. But she didn't need to get herself so worked up over it.

Her face a light pink, she continued eating, looking pretty satisfied. Watching her made me feel a bit envious.

I had no idea why I felt that way. But coupled with my gloom that had lingered since Saturday, all these feelings I couldn't seem to process just seemed to be piling up and weighing me down. And so, I sighed a sixth time.

"Hey, is this about that stuff with Tsukuyomi?"

Ugh...was it that obvious?

"Don't worry about it so much. You were my partner from the start. That was how this whole thing started."

"No, that's not what I'm worried about... Haven't you wondered why Chouko is doing this challenge? How she sees it?"

Thinking back, I felt that way since the piano challenge. She purposely played a song I would like, and she wanted to make my family's favorites for the cooking contest, without concern for what the judges liked and with no attachment to the contest itself.

"It's no big deal."

Really?

"I mean, really it just seems like Tsukuyomi is doing this competition on a whim. My affinity stats with her aren't going up, but just doing the challenge has worked out in my favor."

Right, the whole reason Aritomo even wanted this competition was to live out some otome game in the first place.

"...You don't really care for it, either, do you, Urara?" she asked me, tilting her head.

Don't care for it...was that it? Lady Chouko was always so sweet and kind to me. And I didn't get the feeling she genuinely saw me as an opponent.

That was it. So then, surely—

"Surely she doesn't see me as an equal, and that hurts, especially because we're friends," I muttered.

Aritomo shrugged. "Friends, huh? You don't have many friends, do you, Urara?"

Ouch! She hit me right where it hurt. But she was right. Lady Chouko was probably the only one I could consider a real friend.

I had always been more mature than my peers, likely a result of being reborn in this world with my memories of my past life in Lacrofine still intact. I was unable to make good friends like everyone else had.

"I try to be as genuine as possible with people, but why doesn't that come through?"

"Isn't that it, though? Why you can't make friends?"

She was so quick with a response to my long-held self-doubts.

"I mean, you don't want to lie or deceive people, but sometimes that happens. Treating your friends all formal isn't going to go over well, either. Friendship isn't just about sharing laughter and your tears. Sometimes you get mad, you fight, and then you make up. It's all part of the package."

"Is it really?"

"It is. But isn't that great? For Tsukuyomi to get that upset over you means that you two are just that close."

She had stopped moving her chopsticks, but she began moving them again, filling her mouth with spinach in sesame sauce. She exclaimed, "Whoa, this is tangy!" her eyebrows lifting dramatically.

"You two need to face whatever these uncomfortable feelings are. You'll feel better if you do," she said, trying to light a fire in me.

"Is it really okay for me to be that honest?"

"Of course, of course. I bet if you do that, you two will be close friends like we are now."

Wait, we're friends?!

"...Urara, you were thinking something rude just now, weren't you? I can see it in your eyes!"

She puffed up her cheeks in protest. I couldn't help bursting into laughter. I really hadn't had a relationship like this ever.

This was the first time I could chat and laugh with someone so freely. Friendship wasn't like this in my past life. It was far more confining and restrictive.

"I suppose there's no way around it. We are friends after all."

We are, aren't we? I smiled at the thought.

"Hmph," Aritomo said, expressionless at first, then she broke out in a grin. "Yes, we are friends, somehow!"

Finally, after entering high school, I had made a good friend.

"You two really are adorable. Urara and...Shizuku, was it?"

We were so caught up in bonding that we were caught off guard by the amused voice coming from someone standing over us. We both panicked and looked up.

"Ui, don't flirt with them!"

"Ahh, sorry, sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt girl-talk time."

The owner of the cheerful voice was Mikazuki. The reason he had come to our classroom (even though he was a second-year) along with Shimozuru was likely to try to figure out the next challenge. Just as I expected, he plopped down in a seat next to us and flashed us his usual sly grin.

"Got a message from Mitsuru. He said he wants this whole contest wrapped up by the end of August. So we need to figure out the next challenge."

He pointed both thumbs at himself, indicating he was the advisor this time around.

"So sports, then?" I asked.

"Yeah. I wanted to see what you thought about having it be a sports challenge. Then I can actually coach you like a good advisor should."

"...Uh-huh," Aritomo replied, seemingly unsure of what to say as she shared a look with me. Sports wasn't exactly our forte.

When Mikazuki first arrived, the classroom had been almost empty, but now it was filled with shrieking girls. He met their excitement with a friendly smile and energetic wave. His waving only made them shriek louder, making me realize just how popular he really was.

In the beginning, Aritomo told me her so-called love interests were considered the *crème de la crème* in terms of popularity. No matter how much they hated all the commotion, they were careful not to show it.

However, it was Mikazuki, the jock, with decent grades and a friendly demeanor, whom they screamed especially

loud for.

"Hard to hold a conversation in this little classroom with you around, Ui," Shimozuru announced, making no attempt to hide his uncharacteristically sour disposition. He was right, though; all this excitement made it practically impossible to have a serious conversation.

"I see. I'll come back after school, then. Later, Urara, Shizuku."

He floated out of the room, moving his hands like he was dog-paddling. What an energetic, flashy guy.

(((

AS promised, after school, he came to fetch us, leading us out of the classroom and through the brightly sunlit courtyard, then down a path overgrown with trees.

"Sports, huh? Having Ui-Ui as our coach does sound enticing..."

Should you really be calling him Ui-Ui to his face like that?

"Of course. I'll shower you with all my attention, Shizuku."

So he was just ignoring the Ui-Ui bit? He really was the bigger person.

"Don't push your luck, Ui," Shimozuru cut in.

Since Izayoi was the judge this time, Shimozuru was supposed to be neutral, yet for some reason he still insisted on joining us.

"Ha! Oh, come on, Oboro. You could help me, too. Not like you have anything else to do."

"Nothing else? You jerk..."

His glance flitted over to Aritomo. She merely walked on as if she hadn't noticed.

"So, what sport do you suggest, Ui-Ui? Tennis? Or maybe golf?"

“Hmm, I mean if you want to learn tennis or golf, Shizuku, I can teach you. But those aren’t my preferences,” he said, a crafty grin creeping onto his face, “because I can one hundred percent guarantee you won’t win, no matter how much Chouko holds back.”

Wow. Maybe Mikazuki and the others were used to it, but this was just another example of how amazing Lady Chouko was.

“Well, what’s a sport I can win, then...? Oh, wait! I’m actually pretty good at swimming!”

The sun’s rays danced through the tree canopy. Watching Aritomo mime swimming in that light, she didn’t seem very fast.

“Ah, Chouko can’t swim, so that idea’s out.”

“Wait, Tsukuyomi can’t swim?”

“Doesn’t swim,” Mikazuki clarified with a wave of his hand.

I wondered what the difference between *couldn’t* and *didn’t* was, but nevertheless, if she didn’t swim, then that idea was out.

I heard someone mumble, “That sucks. If we did swimming, I could get some awesome CGs of them with their shirts off.”

Awesome CGs? Of whom?

Aritomo seemed dissatisfied. I thought I should say something before she erupted.

“I can’t swim at all, so please, let’s choose something else.”

The elementary and middle schools I attended did not have pools, and powerful indoctrination from my past life made me uncomfortable wearing a bathing suit in front of others, so I had never once been in a public pool. This was one matter on which I could not yield.

As soon as I said my piece, everyone quickly agreed, satisfied with my reasoning. I was a bit shocked they were so quick to accept that I couldn’t swim.

Hearing this about me, Aritomo gave up on the idea and started trying to come up with other options. I really wanted to learn her brand of mental flexibility.

“So what’s the plan, then? You brought us all the way out here. Is there a reason for that?”

“There is. Come on, just a little farther,” Mikazuki said, guiding us down the tree-lined road.

Unlike many other schools, St. Delia’s included students from preschool to high school, so the campus was huge. It had only been three months since we started school here, so we had no idea where on this vast campus this small path would lead.

As the path suddenly opened up, we saw a vast sunlit paddock surrounded by a fence.

In a stable a little ways away, several horses flicked their tails.

“Horses!” I exclaimed with delight.

“...Those are horses all right,” Aritomo said with a little less pleasure.

“Yup, horses.”

Mikazuki stretched his arms out wide. With a broad grin on his face, he finally offered his suggestion.

“Let’s make the next challenge horseback riding! That’s my suggestion!”

Chapter 5: The Lady and the Horse

HORSES!

They looked a great deal like the tuulies we used to ride in my past life.

I noticed they were a distinctively large breed, by this world's standards at least, and had a wild disposition, but still, I quite liked these "tuulies."

They were incredibly intelligent and would carry any rider who had earned their trust faster than the wind. There was really no other animal that could take a human as far as they.

Back when I was a child of the Ortegamo family, we owned three tuulies. I named mine Kalelion and would often ride away on her back for trips or excursions. Kalelion's jet-black fur was gorgeous, and her form, whether standing or galloping, was magnificent. She would allow no one else to ride her, so she was mine and mine alone.

Ah, even though these look so much like tuulies, they are horses, so I suppose I should refer to them as such.

"Is it just me, or are you really excited? You really like horses, huh?" Aritomo mused.

"Yes! I adore them!" I answered with much more excitement than I intended to. "Um, would it be all right to get closer?"

My eyes were aglow looking at the horses.

"Of course!" Mikazuki said, flashing me a grin.

I never would have expected horses on the school grounds. When I mentioned this as we approached the stables, I was told they were for the equestrian club, who were scored on how they bred, raised, and trained them.

Students were allowed to join starting in middle school, and students all the way up to those attending a nearby college were allowed to use the facilities. All told, there appeared to be over fifteen horses being cared for here.

"Now that you mention it, I'm pretty sure I saw this place pictured on the pamphlet," Aritomo said, taking a carrot.

"Yeah, I took that picture! Here, try giving them a carrot! Their reaction is so cute."

So Mikazuki was skilled even at horseback riding.

I did as he suggested and grabbed a carrot, then headed for the stable. The horses all eyed me with great interest. They were likely cautious at the appearance of a human they had never seen.

I approached while slowly lifting my eyes to meet theirs so as not to spook them. One of the black horses took notice of me.

I stood in front of it, meeting its gaze. It blinked rapidly and gazed back at me. It seemed to be a gesture of goodwill, so I began speaking softly to it.

"Hello, good afternoon. I'm Urara Tendou. You're quite beautiful, aren't you? I would love it if you would accept this carrot."

I slowly held out the vegetable, and the horse gently began to munch on it. It was so cute, the way that horse ate, and I couldn't stop watching.

I started speaking to it again after waiting for it to finish chewing.

"Would it be all right to pet you?" I asked in as gentle a voice as possible. The horse obliged, lowering its head a bit for me. Taking that as a sign that it was okay, I got closer and began stroking its head.

Its silky hair felt amazing under my hands. Experiencing that feeling after so long made me break out in a smile.

"Oh, impressive. You got Galileo your first time."

"I'm a bit surprised. To think Galileo would take to anyone this fast..."

Mikazuki and Shimozuru were surprised while watching me increase my rapport with the black horse.

"You said this horse's name is Galileo?" I asked, keeping my voice quiet.

"Yup, that's right. He used to be a racehorse and came here after he retired, but he's got a reputation for being difficult."

How could they say that when he so readily allowed me to pet him?

Galileo, huh? In spite of his massive size, I had already become smitten with his beautiful black coat, that intelligent look in his eyes, and the way his name sounded similar to my beloved Kalelion's.

Galileo seemed to enjoy it as well as I began to stroke his back. His affinity for me continued to grow.

Watching the rapport between the two of us, Aritomo pursed her lips in exasperation.

"All right, we get it. Horses. So horseback riding, right? Why? And how can we really win that?" she asked Mikazuki.

"That all depends on you two, Shizuku. Though, with Galileo this smitten, the odds may just be in your favor," he responded with a smile.

"So you say, but I'm sure Tsukuyomi's already an ace at riding horses, isn't she?"

"Eh, she can ride as good as anyone else."

As good as anyone else.

Those words seemed awfully loaded.

"No, that won't work. I mean, I've been horseback riding, but I've never practiced it as a sport," Aritomo said, glancing at me as she chose her words carefully. "And, Urara, you might have a bond, but have you actually ever ridden a horse?"

That was a natural concern. I can understand how they would suspect that a commoner who couldn't even swim

had likely never ridden a horse.

"Aw, come on, Urara's at least got the hang of handling them. It's almost uncanny," Mikazuki said, his words hitting me right in the heart.

I mean, in my past life, I sort of...

No, I couldn't. I needed to keep that to myself.

"That's a great start for us. And we'll be sure to get you both plenty of practice! And anyway, animals tend to hate Chouko!"

Wh-What? Really? They hate Lady Chouko?

"It's kinda wild—even normal animals are hesitant to approach Chouko at first. Actually, most of them straight up run away from her."

"...Ahh."

So what would constitute an abnormal animal?

"I guess you could say they shrink away from her. Particularly animals that haven't been well trained will...flee," Shimosuru added, but I still had a difficult time believing this was true.

"But most horses used for competition are well trained, aren't they?" Aritomo asked nonchalantly.

They hadn't said anything about how exactly we would be using the horses to compete, but clearly we would need to train and practice with the horses, so I didn't think that would be too much of a disadvantage for Lady Chouko.

"Anyway, if animals are involved, Chouko won't have an overwhelming advantage. And honestly? Pretty much every other contest I can think of, she could win. This is the only thing I could come up with," Mikazuki insisted.

It was easy to take him at his word. I knew quite well how incredible Lady Chouko was. She even excelled at cooking, which she came to with no prior experience.

In that case, having a contest with an irregular partner like a horse didn't seem like a bad idea.

...Hm? Irregular partner? ...Now, where have I heard something like that before...? Ah well.

I exchanged glances with Aritomo. Both of us nodded.
We just needed practice. We could do this.

We decided to accept Mikazuki's advice and were about to tell him when, suddenly, we caught sight of Lady Chouko charging down the pathway.

"Ui, I was wondering why you called me out here! Are you serious?" she asked, her eyes fixed on Mikazuki as she walked briskly over to us.

"If I wasn't, why would I have asked you to come all this way?" he responded in a flippant tone, meeting her eyes, almost as if he were trying to agitate her.

"It's reckless to put beginners on horses and have them compete," Lady Chouko objected.

"They both seem like they'll manage just fine. Trust me."

I could understand Lady Chouko's annoyance at Mikazuki's laughter.

"Idiot. Who would ever trust you?"

Lady Chouko glanced at me and sighed. "Urara can't possibly compete. She's never ridden a horse. What are you going to do to keep her from getting hurt?"

Lady Chouko said it wasn't possible for me. She didn't even want to hear what I had to say. It was just: "not possible."

In my present life, no, I hadn't ridden a horse. So I can understand why she would assume that and why she'd be so concerned for me.

However, my blind devotion to Lady Chouko wasn't so great that I could remain silent when she so firmly denied me the opportunity without asking me first.

After realizing the other day how much I longed to be an equal to her, I couldn't continue to allow her to keep being so overprotective of me.

It was one thing, figuring that out in my conversation with Aritomo, but now she was right in front of me.

I turned to face Lady Chouko head-on. She pivoted and looked me straight in the eye, as if somehow relieved.

"Urara," she said, reaching out to stroke my hair, but I pushed her hand away.

"I'm going to do it."

"You're what...?"

"I'm asking you to please agree to this challenge."

I wasn't sure if it was the words I spoke or the fact that I pushed her hand away, but she looked shocked.

"I'm so grateful you're worried about me, but I've decided to accept Mikazuki's help," I said, doubling down on her.

"Oh, but, Urara, doing this so suddenly could be dangerous. Look, if you want to try horseback riding, I can train you some other time."

Because horses are dangerous—

"Please don't speak for me," I responded instinctively.

Horses are wise, gentle creatures. If you open your heart and work with them, they can be tremendous allies.

I didn't mind someone being concerned for me, but what I did mind was seeing something I loved being defamed. I told her as much.

"I don't like you being this way, Chouko! Not at all!" I blurted out with a glare, leaving Chouko with a dumbfounded expression. My words probably seemed to come out of nowhere, but I was irritated with her. I averted my gaze.

I realized then that Mikazuki and Shimozuru looked just as astonished as Lady Chouko did.

"Um...sorry, Chouko."

"Ahh, my bad, Chouko."

For some reason, the two of them were apologizing to Lady Chouko. It was Aritomo who finally broke in and interrupted the silence.

"Anyway, we've already decided on horseback riding for the next challenge. So please... Uh, Tsukuyomi, are you

listening?"

Lady Chouko's face had gone blank.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yes," she said vacantly.

"Yeah. I don't think she was listening, so we'll talk it over later," Shimozuru said.

"Right. Well, we'll start tomorrow. See you in the morning. Five thirty sharp," Mikazuki instructed.

"All right, we'll see you then," I responded.

"That's too early!" Aritomo sputtered next to me, her face going pale.

Let's give it our all, Aritomo.

(((

I hadn't considered how nice it would be, going for a ride while the birds chirped their sweet song so early in the morning.

I reached the paddock a little earlier than we were scheduled and found Mikazuki, already changed into his jersey, tending to the horses.

I rushed over to help, but he turned me down.

"Our school is rich, as you know, so we normally have employees to take care of the horses, but I like doing this, so really, it's fine."

He was patting Galileo's neck gently and seemed to be enjoying himself.

"You said Galileo has a hard time with people, but the two of you seem comfortable together, Mikazuki."

"Mm, well, that's because I usually tend to him."

For horses and humans, the more time you spent around someone, the more likely you were to get comfortable with them.

"In that case, let me help you," I said, wanting to get closer to Galileo as well. "I'll go get changed. Please teach

me all you know.”

“You want to help? You can use the girl’s changing area over there then,” he said, a hint of admiration in his voice as he pointed at a little building on the other side of the stables.

A sleepy-looking Aritomo wandered over to us as I was helping Mikazuki in the stable, so we decided to go for a ride.

“...Urara! How are you such a natural at this?”



“Um... Hey, Aritomo, you can't be so timid!”

She was being so shy with her horse. Completely different from how she normally was.

After borrowing some of the equestrian club's extra helmets, riding boots, and gloves, we went for a ride. It had been so long, and yet the moment I got on, that muscle memory resurfaced.

“Urara's right. Straighten up your back, Shizuku.”

Because we were beginners, we each had a stable guide walking next to us. Mikazuki was giving us tips from atop a brown horse.

I was riding Galileo, and Aritomo had chosen a horse the same shade of brown as Mikazuki's, with white hair around the hooves, named Roselila.

“Is it all right if we go a bit faster?” I asked the guide walking next to me, and after they made eye contact with Mikazuki and received his approval, they agreed.

“Galileo, let's go for a little run.”

Grasping what I had said, Galileo began to pick up the pace, kicking up a bit of sand as he went.

It felt so good, and so nostalgic somehow: my body swaying, the wind blowing through my hair.

Kalelion and I used to run like this, the sun dappling through the trees on us.

Along with those memories, several emotions—feelings I could not simply do justice to with just one word—came flooding back.

Pain. Heartbreak. Happiness. Joy. And sadness.

I was completely absorbed by these emotions I hadn't experienced since being reborn into this world.

I had cast off my nobility and wished to become a commoner and so had been reincarnated here. Everything since had felt like a blessing as I spent my days in relative freedom, but even so, it seemed the old me still lived on within me... How strange.

And I realized in that moment that the noble life I had hated hadn't been all bad.

If I hadn't been who I was, I would never have known my father, my mother, Kalelion, or all the others I had the opportunity to meet. Perhaps I had many painful experiences or times when things didn't go as planned for me. But I had many happy experiences as well.

My previous life may have ended sooner than expected, but I had been happy.

As if noticing that my mind was elsewhere, Galileo slowed down. He looked back at me quizzically and I couldn't help feeling guilty.

"I'm sorry, Galileo. Come on, giddy up."

Galileo reacted to my words with a neigh and sped up.

I heard Mikazuki whistling. Aritomo was shouting, and it worried me, her getting so loud around the horses.

Hehehe, this really is lovely, I thought, realizing I felt much happier in this life than I had in the last.

(((

"...OWW..."

"That's a pretty rookie mistake, Urara. Eh?" Mikazuki said with a grin, trying to suppress his laughter.

"Ungh...I can't argue with that... Ow!"

"Ahh, ow... My butt and my thighs are killing me..."

Aritomo and I were both rubbing our backsides, trying to dull the pain. While my mind might have remembered what it was like riding a horse, my body naturally lacked the same experience.

"You looked so gallant when you were riding at a gallop, though."

Thank you for the compliment.

"But you still don't have the endurance you need."

No argument there.

“So I suppose that means we need to start with strength training tomorrow, then.”

“Whaaat?!” Aritomo’s shout reverberated throughout the stable. I completely agreed, but there was no way out of this.

None whatsoever...

Ui Mikazuki’s Insights

“**THEY** are both working hard on building up their physical strength,” I told Chouko, but she merely sat there sipping her tea, ignoring me. I dropped by her house after dinnertime, but she was being cold.

Resigned, I moved so I was right in front of her and started talking again. “Are you sulking again? You’re such a spoiled brat.”

Despite her composed features, she wasn’t speaking to me, clearly proof that she was in a sour mood. This was getting obnoxious.

“Which reminds me, Urara—”

That caused her ears to perk up and her teacup to stop just short of her lips. So she was listening. Why did she always have to be such a pain?

“Honestly, it’s shocking how good she is with the horses. But why? Has she really never ridden before?”

“No, not as far as I know...”

What is she, a stalker now? I don’t know if Chouko could read my thoughts, but she narrowed her eyes at me just the same.

“It’s not like I investigated her or anything.”

You totally did.

Well, Chouko hadn’t completely crossed the line into self-absorbed, all-must-bow-to-the-mighty-king territory yet. She was more like the Ice Queen, the cool beauty, attached

to very little. She wasn't really trying to control anything or anyone.

One time when we were kids, she came close to exploding, but it seemed the best thing was to let her be to cool off on her own.

However, the way she had become so protective of Urara was so out of character. It seemed best to let her pursue Urara for now. At least, that was what I thought.

"Wasn't that Haruto kid you used to dote on a Tendou, too?"

She continued ignoring me. Bingo.

Haruto was a year younger but had studied kendo longer, and even as Kogetsu got stronger, the two of them had a strong rivalry.

It still feels to me like something must have happened to make him quit going to the dojo so suddenly like that.

And while I don't know if that somehow involved Urara...something did happen.

At any rate, I have to give Urara props. I had never seen Chouko so obsessed with anyone.

I mean, maybe Chouko's matured a little from not caring about anyone else? Though I don't think anything good will come from her getting so fixated.

"So, I think you should start coming to the stables to practice with us. I know you can ride, but if you get too cocky, you'll lose to them," I said, trying to use the sweetest tone I could manage, but she still continued to ignore me. No, I got an even worse vibe from her than before.

"You know, Urara's not mad at you anymore."

Oh, she moved at that. Maybe I could push just a little more.

"Really, she's not. Actually, I think she's worried about you. And there have been other club members messing with those two while you're not around..."

"What?! Ui, why aren't you doing anything about that?"

Whoa, there it is! Kogetsu rears his head for the first time in forever. How long had it been? This would've been hilarious if it weren't so scary. I'm sure Saku and Mitsuru would love to have seen it.

"Ui!"

I gave Chouko a look, imploring her to tell me what was wrong. So this was the "king" side of Chouko, then.

"Well, you know, guys are like that. And anyway, they're just admiring them from a distance, so don't sweat it."

"Tch."

Wow, an actual tongue click.

"I don't want them looking either."

Ah, jealousy. This was really bad. And weird. What happened to our flawless Lady Chouko? So just hinting that someone was messing with Urara was enough to spur her into action. She angled her chin as if to wordlessly demand I tell her who it was. *Say it with words, damn it—come on!*

"Well, it's not even boys..."

"Girls, then?"

"Yeah, well, pretty much."

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Those girls better keep away from my Urara!"

Don't you mean both girls? What happened to poor Shizuku?

But the reason was obvious...

"Maybe I shouldn't be hanging around them..."

A loud bang reverberated throughout the room. Chouko smacked me, open-handed! On the head!

"Stop! Ow, hey! Don't hit me so hard! I don't have the brain cells to spare!"

"Don't worry, you were born stupid."

What was her problem? But I guess I shouldn't have been surprised.

Students can join the equestrian club starting in middle school, but there were some, many of them the absentee members of the club, who joined in name alone. They could

ride horseback, but they were probably just there to try to hit on me or Mitsuru.

"Plenty of students fawn after you guys. Why would they cause trouble now?" Chouko asked, eyeing me in annoyance.

"But some of them are a real pain and might go the extra mile to cause problems. There's this second-year, Hattori, who's just so clingy and obsessive, y'know?"

Chouko glared at me out of the corner of her eye and began drumming her fingers on the table.

"I've been a very attentive teacher for the two of them. And Mitsuru and the others seem pretty interested in what they're doing as well. Aren't you?"

"The hell do you mean by 'attentive'?"

That's what she was bothered by?

I was trying to warn her to look out for Urara, and she had completely missed the point.

(((

A week had passed since we had borrowed the equestrian club facilities and started receiving training from Mikazuki.

I had been borrowing my helmet and riding boots from the club, but Aritomo had bought a set for herself and one for me as well.

Naturally, I had protested, but she insisted, saying, "I consider these necessities for the competition." I accepted and offered her my gratitude. I had started a part-time job and would only be able to pay her back a little at a time.

As for the riding lessons themselves, I came to the challenge with my past life experience, and Aritomo, a decent athlete, gradually got better at gripping the reins.

We rode our horses side by side. Aritomo seemed much more comfortable.

“Now how did you get so good at riding?” she asked me more than once.

Ohohoho, I’ll never tell. I couldn’t come out and say that it was something I took an interest in in my past life.

...And then I suddenly remembered.

Now that I thought back on it, Aritomo once told me she, too, was reborn after a past life. She said this was the world of an otome game she had played. This world likely hadn’t been as different for her as it had for me. Perhaps she would actually believe me if I told her of how I had reincarnated.

“Um, Aritomo... I, well...”

“What? Just say it!”

All right, but where do I start? I know...!

“About this whole otome game thing...”

“Oh, that? It’s coming along just fine. The Ojousama Challenge is moving right along.”

Wrong choice of words.

“No, not that... I was referring to your past life. Do you have any memories of it?”

“Hm? Memories? Well, the game’s setting has mostly been as I remember, with little changes here and there. Like Oboro and the sweets thing, or the Prince’s personality.”

That’s not it! I didn’t want to talk about the otome game, but her memories of everything else and the reincarnation... Huh? I lost my train of thought. I needed to get off my horse and get my thoughts together.

The sun was just beginning its descent anyway, so it was time for us to return the horses to the stables.

We handed off Galileo and Roselila to the stable hands and were on our way to the clubroom when we spotted three indistinguishable figures.

“Huh, are those second-years? Urara, do you know them?” Aritomo asked, her eyes surprisingly sharp, but I wasn’t sure.

Their ties were not the bourdeaux-red color we first-years wore, but the khaki the second-years wore. They weren't anyone I knew. However, if they had come so far off school grounds out here, then surely they must be on the equestrian team.

Mikazuki mentioned that most of the female equestrian team members were never around. If they were in fact team members, then it seemed appropriate to introduce myself, so I gave them a bow.

"Hel—"

"Who exactly are you two? Just where do you come from?"

They cut me off. And asked about my house again. This was déjà vu.

I glanced at Aritomo. She looked as if she had swallowed a bug. Ah, she must have recognized them.

"Well, I'm from Ikem—"

"Isn't it good manners to give your own name first before demanding someone else's?"

Aritomo, you cut me off! Again! When I asked Aritomo who they were, she gave me the stop signal without another word.

"I'm benevolent, so I'll overlook your transgression for now."

You clearly are not overlooking it.

"Fine," she said, then continued: "I am Shizuku Aritomo. And this is Urara Tendou."

On hearing her name, the other girls exchanged glances and burst into giggles. It didn't sound as if they were laughing with Aritomo, either.

"Oh, we've heard of you. You're the daughter of the head of...AT Solutions, was it?"

"Good. So you've heard of me. But I'd appreciate it if you actually remembered the company name properly. It's ATN Solutions."

It was looking as if they were about to go to war.

Spurred on by Aritomo's barb, the girl at the center, a second-year with her long hair in a tight braid, glared at us.

"My apologies. I simply wasn't familiar with the name of such a neophyte company. I am Suzushiko Hattori."

Aritomo's face tightened at the insinuation that her family association might not have passed their test.

So this Hattori person's family was richer or more powerful, then. I had never heard of her. Being unaware of family politics made life easier.

"So, what do you want? You must have some reason for coming over to us—something you need to ask, perhaps?"

That was the Aritomo I had come to know. Her pushiness was her strength and allowed her to go head-to-head with Lady Chouko, even.

"Well! I wouldn't say we needed to ask you anything..."

"In that case, could you excuse us? We'd like to get changed," Aritomo spat, grabbing my arm and guiding me toward the clubroom.

"Hold on a second," one of the girls flanking Hattori shouted after us.

"We may not have anything to ask, but we still have a problem. Specifically, you using our clubroom without asking."

I knew it: these were the "silent" team members. I nodded to myself, satisfied, as the third one spoke.

"We have certain requirements for joining the equestrian team, and as it stands...you two fall just a bit short. So we don't want you anywhere near our stables."

We had been outright rejected. Sure, I didn't want to inconvenience anyone actually taking part in equestrian team activities, but...

"Oh, well, maybe you should bring that up with Ui, then? Ui-Ui was the one who told us we could use the clubroom since no one else was."

She was trying to provoke them with everything she had. *Aritomo, this is not the time to be calling him "Ui-Ui,"*

though.

The vein near Hattori's temple was throbbing. Aritomo's own breathing had become ragged as well.

I could hear something that sounded like snarling. Perhaps it was just my imagination, but it still left me on edge. I was genuinely worried about how we were going to make it out of this unharmed.

"Your usage of Mikazuki's first name is vulgar enough, but to think you'd use a nickname like that..."

"Oh dear, does 'Ui-Ui' really bother you so? That's too bad. I have his permission, after all," Aritomo said, giving a satisfied laugh through her nose.

She didn't necessarily have his permission. More like she had gradually worn him down over time. Well, at least Mikazuki didn't seem to mind all that much.

The three second-years were trembling at Aritomo's words. It was obvious they had more they wanted to say, but the idea of Mikazuki's permission blanketed Aritomo like an impenetrable force field.

I needed to diffuse this tension somehow. I tried to draw their attention to me.

"Um—"

"A-NY-WAY!"

Again. Had I been afflicted with some curse? The Curse of Perpetual Interruptions, perhaps...?

"Well, the rest of the team have their own feelings on the matter. We'll leave it at that for today, but just because Mikazuki gave you permission does not mean we're okay with it."

They turned and walked away.

"Wow, obnoxious much?"

Once we were finally able to enter the clubroom and change, I could see a look of exasperation in Aritomo's eyes.

"Were those girls in your otome game?"

I vaguely recall seeing similar character types in the books Kirara lent me.

"You mean Hattori? It wasn't that type of game, so no. Someone like that would usually play the villainess."

Ah, I thought the same thing.

Aritomo went on to tell me that Hattori was the daughter of the head of a massive textile conglomerate, Hatsubou. She hadn't recognized the girl's face, but she knew the name. Hearing the name, I realized I had heard of the company as well.

After the previous day's events, I prepared myself for a confrontation in the morning, but morning practice went on without incident. I was optimistic that the day had been enough for tempers to cool, but my hopes were summarily dashed after school.

"Oh dear, this room is only for use by team members."

When we made our way to the clubroom that afternoon, we found all our riding gear in a heap in front of the door.

There were seven or eight girls in the clubroom, most of them upperclassmen whom I didn't recognize. I recognized one girl from our class, but when she saw us, she quickly made herself scarce.

This was a classic case of trying to freeze someone out. No matter what world, what time period, I recognized this technique all the same. Even after experiencing this in my past life as a poor noble, I wondered how I had ended up in this situation once more.

While I was deep in thought, Aritomo was seething.

"Well, that's awfully crafty of you."

"Now, now. No need for such provocative words. You outsiders really do lack class, don't you?"

The girl looked at each of us. A strange, sour expression eclipsed her face. I wondered why.

It's not important. Don't let them get a rise out of you, Aritomo.

"And what's the problem with outside students?! Aha! I know. Is it because compared with all of you who've spent

your whole lives here, we're still better friends with Ui-Ui and Oboro?"

Why did she feel the need to pelt them with incendiary words?

"You all need to calm down!"

One of them was lunging toward us, her hand outstretched.

Just as those fingers were about to make contact with my shoulder, a beautiful hand intercepted them.

"And what exactly do you all think you're doing?"

"...Huh? Ah, Chouko."

Her cold voice resounded throughout the tiny clubroom, the note of blame in her voice loud and clear. Everyone's faces visibly drained of color at the sound of her voice.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

I had been so rude to her the other day and said I didn't like her. I hadn't seen her since then, even though I'd been tempted to. Seeing her like this, though, gave me an odd sense of relief.

She flashed me a knowing smile, as if she understood how I felt.

"Ui told me to knock off the foolishness and get to practice," she said to us, then turned to the upperclassmen camped out in the clubroom. "And as for your claims about this space, do you mean I cannot use this room, either?"

The faces of the club members, led by Hattori, began to crack, as if something imperceptible had begun to shift within them. I had never in my life seen a situation that so perfectly fit the phrase "the tension was so thick, you could cut it with a knife."

"...No, Tsukuyomi...we would never..."

"I'm not a member of your team, either. And yet for some reason, I'm allowed in here?"

Hattori's lackeys were panicking and attempting to appease Lady Chouko, but she merely spat, "You're hypocrites."

I had been told that here at St. Delia's, Chouko Tsukuyomi was on par with the Mochizuki family, which included the school's chairman. These girls were in no place to argue with her. They merely stood silent, hanging their heads.

"If you have no problems, then we'll be making use of this space. And if you all aren't using it for actual equestrian business, would you kindly leave?"

Lady Chouko's words were like the tug of a string. The other girls quickly left the room in a rush.

The last to go were Hattori and her two lackeys. Their faces were contorted in obvious frustration. And yet, they did not argue any further, merely taking their time to make their way out the door.

"Yeah, Tsukuyomi, you tell 'em!" Aritomo shouted playfully, but Lady Chouko merely brushed her off, as if this were business as usual.

"All right, I'm leaving, so hurry up and change. We're running out of time for practice."

"Oh? Chouko, you're not changing?"

"No, I haven't brought a change of clothes with me."

Then what was she doing here?

"Then why are you here today if you don't have a change of clothes?"

Ah, of course Aritomo asked.

"I came to select a horse."

Well, that is important.

"And I came to see what was going on with the clubroom. But...it seems it's going to be a bit of a problem."

A problem? It looked like a normal room to me.

"Let's just use private rooms for getting changed and storing our gear. Naturally, each of you will receive a key to your own room. I'll have the rooms set up next to this one by tomorrow afternoon."

She sounded as if she was proposing something similar to what Mochizuki had done during the piano contest.

I guess it really was true what they say about birds of a feather flocking together. They're exactly alike.

The next afternoon, just as Lady Chouko promised, there was a little hut next to the clubroom. The outside didn't look much different from the clubroom, but the inside was incredible. Inside were three separate, lockable rooms, each fully stocked. In another similar space were a magnificent table and chairs with a tea set. There was also a kitchenette.

Of course, Lady Chouko intended this space for just the three of us. I wasn't sure if it was full-on abuse of power, or only a misuse of privilege.

"Leave your belongings in your room and make sure you lock up. We each have a key, as well as Ui, to the space as a whole, but I've given away all the keys, so don't lose yours," she explained, handing over keys with intricate designs that prevented anyone from easily copying them.

"This feels a bit...like a waste of money."

It was interesting how Aritomo could say that to Lady Chouko when she had bought both of us new gear, claiming it was a necessity.

We finished changing and made our way outside, where Lady Chouko was already evaluating a horse in the riding ring.

She didn't seem to be hated by the horse in the way Mikazuki had described. I approached and saw that there was indeed some anxiety. From the horse, mind you.

It was less as if he hated her and more as if he was afraid of her.

"His name is Mondaiser. He's the only one who will listen to me, so he's the only option."

Mondaiser was a palomino, but with a coat lighter than chestnut, more closely resembling blond. His breed was normally a calmer one, but around Lady Chouko, his eyes darted about anxiously. He did not seem to be calm at all.

"Chouko, please don't order him. Just ask him."

“What?”

“Try asking if you can pet him.”

A bit baffled by my words, she turned to Mondaiser and asked his permission.

“Now, pet him gently. Slowly,” I instructed.

“All right...”

As she gently stroked his neck with the palm of her hand, his eyes seemed to glaze over. Somehow, he was calming down.

“He’s a smart horse who will do what you ask.”

“Yes. He’s a very good horse.”

After Mondaiser heard Lady Chouko’s tone of voice, his anxiety abated, and he neighed.

“It’s the first time I’ve ever touched a horse this calm.”

Gently, ever so gently, her lovely fingers began to scratch the nape of his neck. Mondaiser stretched his muzzle in pleasure.

“Humans and people are the same. First, you should call them by name. Always start there,” I said, flashing Lady Chouko a smile. She looked a bit surprised but then responded with a smile of her own.

“I can never seem to win against you, Urara. You always have something new to teach me,” she said, her words catching me off guard.

“I-I...could never win against you, Lady Chouko! I haven’t really taught you anything, you know?”

Mikazuki had judged the piano contest on his preferences, not skill, and anyway, she was the one who crushed me in the exam-score challenge.

And sure, I trained her for the cooking contest, but I didn’t compete.

However, Lady Chouko stared straight into my eyes as I was about to correct her in a panic.

“You have. You are right now. So please...stay by my side. Always. Teach me what I lack. And I’ll give it my all.”

My heart throbbed and I swore I could hear it in my ears. This was the first time Lady Chouko had ever been so forthcoming with her feelings like this.

Normally, she might listen to what I had to say, but she would keep her own feelings hidden...but the look in her eyes as we exchanged glances was almost as if she was begging.

Her eyes looked so very sad.

"...I will always be here. By your side."

"Urara..."

I could tell my cheeks were getting a little red. But there was nothing I could do to stop it. Lady Chouko was so precious to me. I reached out my right hand, but as I did, I hit something wet.

"Galileo?"

"Sorry, Urara. Galileo was in a hurry to get going."

Galileo, who had been led over by Aritomo, was licking my hand and nuzzling me.

"I'm sorry, did I keep you waiting? Thank you so much," I said, first to Galileo, then to Aritomo. She handed him over and then returned to Roselila.

"Ah, I'm sorry, Chouko. Galileo here is the horse I've been riding."

"...Yes, I've heard. N-Nice to meet you, Galileo."

Her face twitching with anxiety, Lady Chouko nevertheless stepped forward to greet him.

Aw, she actually listened to my advice. I'm so happy, I thought. Likely picking up on my excitement, Galileo flared his nostrils as well.

(((

"**YOU** shouldn't have done that, Urara," Mikazuki said to me as soon as I walked in.

He, Mochizuki, and the others were apparently having tea in Lady Chouko's makeshift clubroom.

"I can't believe she got Chouko to listen to her advice..."

"This is a perfect example of saving an enemy from trouble instead of taking advantage of their weakness."

"That's so like Tendou."

What on earth were they talking about?

"Urara doesn't even know what she did wrong, so your words are meaningless," Aritomo said critically with no attempt to enlighten me.

It was one thing for Mochizuki and the others to be giving me a hard time, but Aritomo was another matter entirely.

"You have the advantage here. Why would you train Chouko? Y'know?"

Ahh, right. I had been helping Lady Chouko patch things up with Mondaiser.

"Well, she needed help figuring out how to start a rapport. If she can get the hang of that, the rest will come," I explained.

"That's what I'm saying. You need to focus on you winning!" Mikazuki exclaimed, waving his arms about.

Of course. Mikazuki had generously offered up his time, so I needed to do my best.

"Of course. I will. I'll practice and give it my all, so let's go for the gold," I declared, causing the boys to all groan my name and smack their heads in exasperation.

I wonder why.

"By the way, why are you all just sitting around sipping tea in the clubroom?"

Chouko and Mondaiser seemed to be growing closer. After riding practice today, she'd had the staff teach her how to care for Mondaiser, so she had been a little later than the rest of us in getting back.

"We didn't want this room to go to waste. It's not like you were using it."

I guess having a whole room built just for us did seem a tad wasteful.

“Don’t complain. This was still cheaper than Mitsuru’s piano.”

The piano was THAT expensive?! I felt as if those two should have been in much more trouble than I was.

(((

OUR training was proceeding as planned, but we stopped for a short time to prepare for our end-of-term exams. I still made my way to the stables before and after school to say hello to Galileo. Lady Chouko did the same with Mondaiser.

After the last test on the last day of exams, we were able to resume our training.

“How did your exams go, Urara?”

“I think I did all right. How were yours, Chouko?”

“Same as usual, I suppose. There was nothing really unexpected.”

Aritomo had been called away by one of the teachers after exams had finished, so Lady Chouko and I were on our way to the riding grounds. Walking and talking like this, beneath the emerald summer canopy and along that sun-dappled walk, I almost forgot we were even at school.

The sight left me nostalgic for my past life and our summer retreats. I took a big breath, and the clean air flooded my heart, washing it clean.

Lady Chouko opened her mouth wide, watching me.

“Hey, Urara. I have something I’ve been wanting to ask you. May I?”

“Yes, what is it, Chouko?”

She hesitated a bit, even after my response, then finally continued.

“How is it that you can ride horses even though you have no prior riding experience?”

Clearly she thought this should be impossible for someone like me. Yet she still wanted to know why. In that moment I didn't really mind the fact that she had investigated me. What was important was how to explain how I could do what I should not be able to.

What could I say? How could I put it? Sensing my agonizing over what to say, Lady Chouko responded gently.

"I'm not accusing you of anything. I just want to know. Not just about the horseback riding, but also why you carry yourself as you do."

What on earth was I to say to her? I had already tried talking to Aritomo about my past life memories. It hadn't gone very well, unfortunately, and even though I hadn't necessarily confessed about my past life, Aritomo at least had her own as a starting point.

But what about Lady Chouko? What if she refused to accept what I had to say even after I was honest with her? Would she think I was mocking her? Either outcome was equally awful.

She waited silently for an answer. I gazed up into her eyes. Even if I said nothing, I'm sure Lady Chouko would keep her promise and not blame me for doing so.

But then...

"Chouko?"

"Yes, Urara?"

"Will you give me some more time to answer your question? I don't think I can explain it properly just yet. So please, just wait a bit longer... I will think of how to best explain it so it makes sense to you, so please give me a little more time," I said, still gazing into her eyes.

"Thank you," she said, her eyes locked with mine, "I will wait, then."

She gave me a soft smile.

I would need to think long and hard about how best to explain this very, very important matter to her, without messing it up.

IT was finally time for the next challenge to begin.

Aritomo and I each had our own challenges against Lady Chouko.

As she was almost a complete beginner, Aritomo would be competing in a time trial along a prescribed course.

And since I was a tad better than a beginner, I would be competing in a show jumping competition against her. It would be best two out of three, and our advisor Mikazuki and judge Izayoi had already warned me that there would be irregular scoring rules in place.

This wouldn't be a standard show jumping competition, where knocking the bar off or disobedience from the horse would result in docked points. Instead, speed was the primary measure, and a normal rule subtraction would add more time. In other words, knocking the bar off would add four seconds, and while disobedience wouldn't add time, if it happened more than once, the challenger would be disqualified.

This would all be added to each competitor's time. The fastest time would be the winner.

"That should be easy enough to understand, right?"

"You sure thought of everything, huh, Ui?"

Mochizuki's unforgiving words pierced the self-satisfied look on Mikazuki's face.

"No, I was the one who came up with this," Izayoi said softly, holding up his hand.

"Ui was the one who insisted, since Shirazu was the judge and all," Shimozuru explained.

"You two are like a *manzai* act, aren't they, Chouko?" Shinmyou, rejoining us for the first time in a while, was wearing a fake smile that made him look as if he were ill.

"...Yes they are," Lady Chouko responded in a cold tone.

“Those two are so scary! Having them together is like a powder keg waiting to explode!” Aritomo said, blunt as usual.

After a month of practice, it was finally time to show the fruits of our labor. It was the first Saturday since summer break had started and finally time for the equestrian competition.

The week prior, we trained from morning to night, getting basic instruction from Mikazuki. Even I was beginning to see my rudimentary abilities improve.

This was a sport where speed and precision were important components in a time trial, and since there were no plans to lower the bar, he told us it would be critical to follow the course as directed.

Galileo wasn't merely intelligent; he was strong and fast, too, and I was able to guide him without hindering him. We were ready to give it our all together.

And so we began our playday.

“Do your best!”

“Well, this should be fun,” Aritomo replied shockingly, sitting astride Roselila as I tried to encourage her. She continued, a serious look on her face, “I'm leaving it all to her,” before guiding Roselila to the starting line.

She sat properly, unlike the first time, with her back straight, so her equestrian equipment finally looked as if it actually belonged on her.

Just as she said, Aritomo genuinely seemed to enjoy her ride with Roselila. Her words were not mere boasting.

Her time was close to her personal best at 45.7 seconds, and that was more than adequate, but she looked dejected as she rode back.

“I guess it just wasn't enough. And here Roselila and I had finally gotten so comfortable with one another.”

“Yeah! Well, why don't you join the equestrian team? I'm all for you joining...”

Aritomo tilted her head at Mikazuki's invitation, actively contemplating it.

"We already built a clubroom. You could practice jumping. I could teach you," Mikazuki was saying. Shimosuru smacked him on the head.

Lately, Shimosuru had been a bit aggressive with Mikazuki.

As they bantered back and forth, Lady Chouko approached the starting line.

Seeing her standing there with Mondaiser, with whom she'd finally become at ease, I thought she looked more elegant and cool than merely beautiful. I couldn't help being fascinated by her.

From the very start, she moved with even more grace than I expected, as if she was flying through the air.

As a result, her time was 39.8 seconds. It wasn't as fast as I expected, but enough to beat Aritomo.

"A difference of 5.9 seconds, that's pretty close."

"Yes. But now it's my turn. I'll do my best."

I clenched my fists, trying to show off my biceps. I could hear giggling from somewhere nearby.

Huh? Something felt off.

"Yes, give it your all. I'm counting on you, Urara!"

"Okay! You can count on me," I exclaimed, then turned to Galileo. "Let's do our best, Galileo."

Galileo made his own show of agreement, neighing as if to say "Leave it to me."

I exhaled deeply, then held my breath, waiting for the start signal.

In my present life, I hardly ever exercised outside of school, but I had a great deal of experience with dance and horseback riding in my past life. Because of that, I knew one thing above all others: the importance of synchronizing your breathing.

In dance, you synchronize with your partner; in horseback riding, it's with your horse, which seems very

obvious, but it's hard to do without conscious thought. That's why I held my breath until we began.

I gently patted Galileo's neck.

Time to go.

We bowed and jumped over the fence together. Once, then again, we leaped over the bar, increasing our speed until our surroundings became a blur.

I continued along the course, feeling Galileo move beneath me.

Faster and faster, as high as we could go.

And then, after clearing the final hurdle and sliding into the finish line, everything seemed to glow, and I was filled with a feeling of exhilaration.

"Whew..."

We did everything we could.

I breathed a sigh, relieved. Aritomo rushed toward us, waving her arms.

"That was incredible, Urara! You made no mistakes! And that was so much faster than before," she praised me in a pant.

"Yes, that was fast. I never thought you'd pull off something that amazing. Don't you want to try competing for real sometime?" Shimozuru exclaimed, coming up behind Aritomo.

"Wow, thank you so much. So, how was my time?"

"We decided not to announce that until after Chouko goes again. That way, it'll be more interesting, right?"

As we laughed lightly, Shinmyou approached us.

"Good work. I've heard you've been taking good care of Galileo. You're to be commended for your efforts."

"Th-Thank you very much. Riding Galileo was a pleasure for me as well."

"You needn't be so modest. You can ride much better than any of us."

"No, really..."

Shinmyou was chatting with me with a smile that didn't quite feel genuine, but I was trying to forget what had happened between us, so I flashed him a smile in return.

But apparently, he wouldn't be satisfied so easily.

"So, what is it you're hiding from us?"

He had jumped right to the point.

"Saku! You're so rude!"

"I'm sorry? Oboro, you must want to know, too. How is it she can so masterfully handle a horse with no prior experience? More importantly...how is she far more refined than anyone else here?"

As Shinmyou spoke, Shimosuru paused.

"Mitsuru, I know you and the others must be thinking it. You just won't say it. Because Chouko will get mad at you. Isn't that it?"

"...You know that already."

Shimosuru glanced at the starting line, ensuring Lady Chouko still hadn't gotten into position.

"You better not push your luck. You don't wanna tick Chouko off again."

Lady Chouko came from a family on par with the Mochizukis, and yet everyone treated her completely different from how they treated Mochizuki.

I looked to Aritomo. She must have known what I was thinking.

"Tsukuyomi is the heir to the entire Tsukuyomi empire."

Shimosuru and Shinmyou looked shocked.

"...Aritomo, how did you know that!?"

"Huh? Ah, well...damn it."

She had tried to cover her mouth over that last bit, but it had already been too late. Everyone else heard.

Lady Chouko being her father's heir was not public knowledge, so if Aritomo knew, it was likely because it was something that had been established in that otome game. This was not something she could simply tell them, just like

me and my past life experiences. I raised my hand, hoping to deflect.

“Um, I told Aritomo. Um, well, in the school kitchen that day, I heard about it from Shinmyou...”

Shinmyou had definitely made sure I was aware of Lady Chouko’s status that day, so when I fixed my eyes on him, he narrowed his brows, realizing his blunder.

“Yes, come to think of it, I did share that with you. And again, I am sorry...for what happened.”

The way he faltered made me realize just how big a secret this was. Shimozuru turned to us and waved his hand.

“Sorry, but can you pretend like you never heard any of this? It could cause a lot of problems for all of us.”

We both had our own secrets, so we nodded silently in agreement.

“All right. Let’s end this discussion here, then. Chouko has finally reached the starting line.”

Lady Chouko stood at the starting line, trying to calm a visibly anxious Mondaiser as they got ready to begin. They had been doing so well lately, so it seemed odd for them to be having trouble now.

They charged out of the gate at the starting signal with no issue, but still, something wasn’t right. There wasn’t the anxiety there had been that first time; it was more like...excitement, maybe? They were going rather fast, and Mondaiser was unsteady in clearing the jumps. Lady Chouko seemed to be struggling to maintain control of him.

“Isn’t she going a little too fast?”

“Something’s not right.”

Anyone who had watched her regular practices would have noticed. Neither Mondaiser nor Lady Chouko would have attempted such reckless jumps.

“Ah!”

I shouted in time with the sound of the bar toppling over.

"That's not like Chouko to hit the bar," Shimoszuru said under his breath, a hint of worry in his voice.

"Yeah..."

Now I was really worried. But surely... She was staring straight ahead, but her lips were moving as if she was whispering something. I was certain she was talking to Mondaiser. Little by little, his excitement seemed to abate, and he calmed down.

They cleared the last hurdle, the highest one, and reached the goal, Lady Chouko's gentle grin lighting up her face.

"Chouko!"

I couldn't help rushing over to her just after she crossed the finish line. I was met with a wry grin.

"I missed one."

"You were more than fast enough, though. But what happened out there with Mondaiser?" I asked as Lady Chouko began petting him, showing both her concern and her appreciation.

"I'm not sure. He was fine in the first round, but after I let him have some water and a short rest, he got a bit worked up..."

He was much calmer now, nuzzling Lady Chouko. She patted his neck lightly in return.

I still wasn't sure what caused him to get so worked up, but I was relieved that nothing truly bad happened. Just as we were breathing a sigh of relief, Mikazuki's voice rang out.

"These girls apparently put something in Mondaiser's water."

Shinmyou, who had disappeared after Lady Chouko's event began, was now dragging out a group of girls.

"...Hattori? What, why?"

Why were they here? No, more importantly, why would they do such a thing?

Everyone gasped. Everyone except for me seemed to have a good hunch why.

Now that they had been exposed in front of us all, they had nothing to say for themselves and merely stared back at us. The tension in the air was thick.

No one, nothing, moved, save for the wind. In that instant, a loud smack rang out, then another.

"What are you doing?! That hurt!"

Hattori lifted a hand to her cheek and glared at Lady Chouko, who stood before all three in frigid silence.

"I bet you never even considered the fact that Mondaiser could have been seriously injured, did you?"

She was right. A horse as worked up as he was was in no shape for competition. What if he or Lady Chouko had been injured? I bet those girls never thought about that for an instant. It wasn't just Lady Chouko. Everyone else there understood the danger they had caused and awaited their responses.

"We had no idea about any of that! It wasn't me who did it! It was Terawaki!"

"Miss Hattori?! You were the one who told me to put caffeine in the water..."

"I don't know what she's talking about! Mochizuki, please believe me!"

Hattori ignored Lady Chouko even though she stood before her and rushed over to Mochizuki, shouting her pleas. Mikazuki stepped in front of her.

"I don't want to have to get rough with some girl, but I can't just stand idly by after all you've done." He spat in a harsh tone I had never heard him use before.

Frozen with fear, Hattori began backing away, but an icy voice commanded her to halt.

"Stop. I don't want to see or hear any more of this nonsense. Now go," Mochizuki growled at Hattori.

"I believe we've had enough of you, so get lost," Shinmyou said, backing Mochizuki up.

Hattori glared at Lady Chouko. "This is your fault! You're manipulating Mochizuki! You cling all over him like some

slut! Get rough with me if that's what it takes to open your eyes about this woman..."

"Shut it, Hattori!" Mochizuki commanded in an ear-piercing shout.

Lady Chouko heaved a sigh and urged the girl named Terawaki to take her friends and leave. "Go. And don't cross my path again."

Hattori's lackeys heeded Lady Chouko's words and dragged Hattori off in a panic.

"...That was...kind of scary. Is that how a real lady handles things? What a joke."

"Well, they aren't all that bad. But some of them are worse."

Worse than that? Aritomo was right about the scary part.

I began to shudder. Mikazuki must have noticed.

"Sorry, was that uncomfortable for you, Urara?" he asked.

He said it so cheerfully, almost teasingly.

"What makes me uncomfortable is what those girls did. I like all of you," I said emphatically and with a smile. Everyone seemed relieved.

Some of them still had sour looks on their faces, though... *Oh, Lady Chouko, please smile.*

So many surprises had come our way, but at least Mondaiser seemed to be doing okay, so we decided to go ahead and hear the results.

"In the time trial, Aritomo had a time of 45.7 seconds, while Chouko had a time of 39.8 seconds, leaving a difference of 5.9 seconds."

Aritomo pulled a face at hearing the difference in their times. Her competitiveness didn't surprise me anymore, though.

"Then we have the hurdle jump times. Tendou had 57.6 seconds. And Chouko had a time of 59.8 seconds. However, she knocked the bar off, so with a four second penalty, her

time is now 63.8 seconds,” Izayoi announced, glancing down at his notes for the exact times.

“As a result, the team of Aritomo and Tendou have a combined time of 103.3 seconds, and Chouko has a total time of 103.6 seconds. Congratulations, Aritomo, Tendou,” Izayoi said to us as the others all began to clap.

Huh? Wait, what did he just say?

The others had never clapped for us the way they were now.

Aritomo and I looked at one another, both in shock, as Chouko approached and held out her right hand to Aritomo.

“Aritomo, congratulations. You really earned this.”

“Um...right. Thank you, Tsukuyomi.”



Wasn't this the first time the two of them had such an amicable exchange?

Watching them shake hands, I felt so happy; my face broke into a natural grin.

As they separated, Aritomo stared at their hands and then whispered into my ear, "Isn't Tsukuyomi's hand huge?"

Was now really the time to be saying something like that?

"Urara."

"Yes, Chouko?"

"Congratulations! You completely decimated me." Lady Chouko headed my way as she spoke.

"No, I didn't— Hwha!?"

I thought Lady Chouko was coming to give me a handshake and so held out my right hand, but instead she threw her arms around me and wrapped me in a tight embrace.

"Um, Ch-Chouko?!"

"Hm? What?"

I patted Lady Chouko's back, which seemed to be straighter than usual, and while she answered me, she showed no signs of completely pulling away.

Aritomo walked over to Shimozuru, looking annoyed, which left me standing there in Lady Chouko's embrace.

I tried to think of something, anything, to bring her back to the present.

"Um, wow, you and Mondaiser sure were fast, weren't you?"

"Thank you. But after knocking the bar over, we were no match for you."

...Huh? Something was different about her.

Normally, Lady Chouko was so calm and collected, always smiling. In that moment, with my face in her collarbone, I couldn't see her expression, but somehow she seemed a bit sullen.

“Chouko...are you upset about the match?” I asked softly.

“Yes,” she murmured after a pause.

The others were watching us and managed to hear her response. Murmurs of “Whoa!” and “Seriously?” rippled throughout the group.

“It’s just, both Mondaiser and I worked so hard.”

“But we don’t know how he would have done under normal circumstances.”

“Still, a loss is a loss.”

I was a little shocked. To think that someone like her, who faced everything with that cool demeanor, could be upset by something like this.

Not to mention the fact that she truly had come to see herself and Mondaiser as a team.

In the past, she wouldn’t have cared so much about the challenge. I wondered what had changed.

As I patted her back, I felt Galileo nuzzling my shoulder with his head, likely trying to get my attention.

Poor Lady Chouko, upset after losing. The way she had come to me for comfort, though, was incredibly endearing.

I hugged her tighter in hopes of comforting her, feeling happy to have seen another side of her. When I did, she pulled away, her warmth leaving with her. When I looked up at her, I saw her face was bright red, and our eyes met.

“I’m sorry. Was it hard to breathe?” I asked.

Was she bothered by me suddenly hugging her back?

“If so, I’m sorry,” I apologized, but she shook her head.

“That’s not it... I’m who’s sorry for showing you my ugly side.”

“There is nothing ugly about you. Actually, I was happy you opened up to me,” I said.

“Thank you,” Lady Chouko responded, but she looked rather uncomfortable after hearing my honest feelings.

She put her hands on my shoulders and spun me around.

"Let's join the others. If we stay here much longer, I don't know if I'll be able to control myself."

"What do you mean?" I asked as she began pushing me along.

"I might bring you back home with me," she muttered.

I didn't understand what that meant. Did she mean she wanted to have a sleepover? I wouldn't mind that.

Lady Chouko prodded me the whole way back to where Aritomo awaited us with a sly smile. I wanted to ask her what that grin was for, but a cold, resonant voice spoke first.

"Well, shall we go ahead and decide the details for the next challenge?" Shinmyou said, and everyone else fell silent.

"We don't have to decide right now. Let's give it a few days."

"Right. We're all sweaty, so let's call it a day."

Izayoi and Mikazuki both proposed we wait to decide, likely out of consideration for us girls.

"Mitsuru said the same thing. He wants this all over by the end of August," Shinmyou said resolutely.

"Come on, cut everyone some slack..."

"Oboro, don't you remember what's coming up?" Shinmyou asked, though it sounded more like a reprimand. Rather than argue with him, Shimosuru merely fell silent. I wondered what exactly he meant, but I didn't want to intrude by asking, so I merely nodded along. I gave Aritomo a look, hoping she would get the same message.

"All right then, let's hurry up and make a decision," Aritomo responded quickly, seeming more and more pushy by the day.

I could sense Lady Chouko getting more annoyed by the second.

"Well, the advisor and the judge are..."

This was the final challenge, so there could only be two left.

"I'll be your advisor this time, and Mitsuru your judge. We look forward to your efforts," Shinmyou said nonchalantly.

I couldn't fight the feeling that this challenge would be the one most fraught with trouble.

We decided not to stand around talking and found somewhere more suited to a longer discussion.

It would have been more logical for just the two of us to speak with our advisor, but Lady Chouko was vehemently opposed, so we all went into the clubroom together.

No one else in our group was likely to do it, so I set to work preparing tea for us.

"This is good," Mochizuki sighed as he drank his tea.

"It really is delicious, Urara."

"Yes, it certainly is."

"Thank you very much. Making tea is a specialty of mine."

In my past life, it was essential for ladies to know how to make excellent tea, so I was quite used to it. I felt so happy being praised for something that was a skill of mine.

Since I had reveled in my tea-making skills, Shinmyou once again had his own thoughts to interject.

"Did you teach yourself? Or did you learn it somewhere?"

Lady Chouko clambered to her feet, but I held out a hand to stop her, then turned to face Shinmyou.

"I'm self-taught, naturally. Not just in making black teas, but I enjoy green teas and Chinese teas as well. Shall I make you a cup?" I responded with a smile on my face, despite my irritation.

"Anyhow, let's get back to the topic at hand. Our next challenge."

"Our advisor has something he would like to discuss with us. What would that be, Mr. Advisor?" Aritomo said, her tone belligerent.

“Yes, I have a proposal, but first, there are conditions to said proposal.”

“Conditions?”

“Correct. Conditions I will expect you to fulfill. If you comply, then I will provide you all you need for this challenge.”

“You sound awfully self-important. Well, let’s hear your conditions first and then we’ll decide.”

The air in the room had gotten rather fraught. First of all, Lady Chouko still seemed rather intense. And then there was the way Shimozuru and the others looked on with disgusted expressions on their faces.

“Very well. My conditions, then,” Shinmyou said, turning to face the others before proceeding. “Before I can share my advice, I need Chouko to accept the challenge itself. Do you think you can do that?”

How were we supposed to take his proposal?

Up to this point, Lady Chouko had included all of us in the decisions, the cooking challenge notwithstanding. For other challenges, including the equestrian one, Lady Chouko had given her approval after the fact. That Shinmyou had said this with that knowledge must have surely been because he knew Chouko would not agree to whatever he was about to suggest.

The proof was in that it was Lady Chouko, not us, whom he had fixed his eyes on.

Exchanging glances, Aritomo and I couldn’t tell whether we even factored into this proposal.

A magnificent voice resonated in our ears as we floundered in how to express our concerns.

“So, what do you wanna do? You’re the only one who can decide,” Mochizuki was saying to Lady Chouko.

It was for her to decide?

Really? Even though it was our competition? Just as I was about to ask if it was really okay to leave it all to Lady Chouko, she shot me a look, telling me to stop.

“All right. We’ll accept your advice and conduct the next challenge accordingly,” she said, accepting Shinmyou’s proposal with a gentle smile.

Shinmyou furrowed his brows a bit on hearing those words before returning to his usual cool demeanor and announcing the next challenge.

“The next round will be a dance contest. Naturally, we’ll be expecting something high-class. Understand?”

Chapter 6: The Lady Who Couldn't Dance

DANCE? Wait, a dance contest?

Wouldn't that put Lady Chouko, the quintessential lady, at a huge advantage?

Aritomo and I looked at each other, wondering if this was going to work out.

"You really know how to go for a person's weak points, don't you, Saku?"

"Chouko, you're one to talk."

They were both smiling, and yet their words were dripping with disdain.

"Huh? Wait, can Tsukuyomi not dance?" Aritomo's loud question ripped through the ice storm blowing between the two of them. Too direct, as always.

"She has never danced in her life. Not once," Mochizuki told us. The air in the room grew even tenser as he turned to Shinmyou. "You knew that, and yet you still suggested this?"

"Of course. Chouko knew what she was getting into when she allowed me to select a challenge, and so should have you," Shinmyou said, a hint of animosity in the way he addressed Mochizuki. He had been so volatile toward me, and now it would appear his relationship with the others was strained as well.

I couldn't help feeling a bit guilty about that, but I had no idea what to say.

"It's all right, Urara. This is our problem to address," Lady Chouko said gently, likely noticing my distress.

"Right. And if this is what you want, then I'm not going to stop you. Not like I ever could anyway," Mochizuki said. His words were terse, but his tone still held the softness he clearly felt for Lady Chouko.

"All that's left is the date. I want to say two weeks, but it looks like we'll need three."

"Three weeks?!" Aritomo exclaimed, trembling as she held up three fingers.

"Aritomo, do you not have any dance experience?" I asked.

"I studied it a little...but I skipped lessons a lot..."

It was obvious just by looking at her that this challenge was going to be tough on Aritomo. When I turned to Shinmyou, hoping to see if an extension were possible, he merely met my gaze with a grin.

"I promised you complete support, and I intend to do that promise justice. I have prepared a teacher and a practice venue. I expect the contest on the third Saturday in August to be very entertaining indeed," Shinmyou said flatly.

We don't stand a chance. Let's just give it up, Aritomo.

(((

"**WHY**, oh why, did it have to be dance? I suck at it!" Aritomo cried out. At least she had waited for the others to leave. She had matured a bit. If this had been April...

"But seriously, Tsukuyomi's never danced before? Can that really be true?"

It was a fair question. When Shinmyou had proposed the dance challenge, I wondered the same thing.

"Everyone said so," I said. "Mochizuki stressed it more than anyone."

"True. They did..."

The others had left us in the clubroom to hold our strategy meeting. Our tea had grown cold, so I made a new pot. After a sip of that rich flavor, I felt at ease. I turned to Aritomo.

"I know you said you hate it and aren't good at it, but you have learned how to dance, right?" I asked point-blank.

She told me herself she had studied a variety of things all for the sake of this otome game, so I had to believe this was one of them.

"...I..."

"You?"

"I've...had a trial lesson...you could say..."

"You've barely studied it at all, then."

"...Yeah."

"Outside of piano, you haven't studied any of it, have you? Not cooking or horseback riding? What about etiquette? English conversation? Tea making? Flower arranging? Dance? Just be honest with me, Aritomo!"

Aritomo was panting heavily, trying to steady her breathing as I awaited her response.

"But...I..."

"You?"

"I'm the heroine, damn it! My position as heroine means I should be good at everything!" she shouted defiantly.

So this baseless confidence was the reason she had pursued this competition. She was the heroine, therefore that should have guaranteed she would win every time.

"What have you been thinking since the competition started?" I pressed.

"Well...it hasn't gone at all like I expected. I mean, I lost to you, even. I've started to feel as if being a part of this competition is pointless."

Exactly.

"But..."

"But?"

"I started this competition to play out the role of the heroine from *Moonlight Beauty*, but...I don't really know if I care about the love interests anymore."

"Huh?"

Was she giving up on the otome game, then?

“Just listen to what I have to say,” she insisted, holding up her hand. “Ever since I started spending time with you and Tsukuyomi, I’ve had so much fun, laughed and cried so much, that I’d almost forgotten I was inside an otome game.”

“I thought you were doing this for your love interests,” I said, my face growing hot. “And if not, then why keep doing the challenges at all?”

“Because actually having friends has been fun on its own,” she muttered, looking away.

She really had changed. When we first met, all she cared about was the otome game, but somewhere along the way, she’d had a change of heart. Such as when she’d managed to put her faith in Roselila during the equestrian contest.

“Oh, but I mean I still wanna win. It is the fifth and final challenge, after all! So I wanna give it my best!”

That was the Aritomo I knew. I’d had no idea she’d been feeling this way. But if she was ready to give this last challenge all she had, then I would teach her every technique I knew.

“Wait... Urara, what’s that look in your eye...? I’m getting chills here!”

The Vices of Oboro Shimosuru

“I thought you’d refuse the dance contest, Chouko.”

I was impressed with Chouko for taking on the challenge, but I was also worried about whether it’d really be okay.

That’s why I’d used the pretext of returning a book to visit and ask point-blank. The response when I did only left me more in shock.

“Oboro, call me Kogetsu. No need to go to so much trouble in the privacy of my own room.”

“...Really?”

I sat down on his bed. It was the only other place, as he had just a bed and his desk. Not so much out of some pursuit of simplicity, but more so that he hadn't bothered to get anything else.

“Okay, then. But why the change of heart, Kogetsu? You've gotten so stubborn lately.”

He had a bad habit of playing dumb even when he knew the answer, but he also seemed more reserved and even bashful about certain things than he ever had before.

“Whatever. It's because of her, I'm sure, so I won't push you any further.”

“It drives me nuts how you keep trying to force me to say it, even though you've already got it figured out.”

Well, looks like I was right on the money.

We're the same age and have a lot in common. We're close enough that we can often tell what the other is thinking. At times like this, though, it can be frustrating. The others, especially Saku, have had it drilled into their heads that they're to protect and serve Kogetsu. So they wouldn't dare go against him or Mitsuru. And Kogetsu knows that.

“But why would he choose to do this now?”

“You mean Saku?”

He got it.

“Huh? You don't seem mad.”

Kogetsu didn't really care much about anything, so his mood swings were hard to read, save for when he got really angry. When he got angry, it was a quiet, sullen anger.

“Not really. That's par for the course for him. But I still haven't forgiven him for what he did to Urara,” he said in a cold voice.

Whoa, scary.

She was somehow the only window into his true feelings. Urara Tendou. No matter how hard Saku investigated our classmate, he couldn't find a thing to validate his suspicions.

She had been born and raised a commoner, with no record of studying horseback riding, piano, or dance. Especially weird was the way she carried herself.

"By the way, have you gotten any more information on Tendou?" I asked.

"...Information?"

"Come on, I don't have the time for head games. Did she tell you why she's so good at everything without even studying it?" I pressed.

It really is an obnoxious habit, the whole playing-dumb thing.

I began tapping my foot to show my irritation and finally got an answer out of him.

"I asked her, but she hasn't given me an answer yet."

"Oh, so you have tried to find out."

Kogetsu was being surprisingly patient with her.

"It's fine. I don't want to force her," he said softly.

The gentle look my childhood friend got on his face when he talked about her wasn't something he could show out in public. It was a little shocking seeing how much love could change a person.

I heaved a slight sigh, which Kogetsu must have heard.

"You of all people shouldn't be giving me crap about it right now. You know Mitsuru likes girls who are a little weird like *her*, so you'd better make your move while you have a chance."

My heart pounded. I was at a loss for words.

I realized he was talking about Aritomo. I thought she was weird at first, too, but spending more time with her made me realize she was both tough and funny. Not only that, but the face she made when she was anxious about something was so cute, I could hardly stand it.

But it was clear from the start that she was more interested in Mitsuru. She even called him the Prince. I knew that, and so I tried not to get attached. Over time, he had become increasingly kinder to her.

Spurred on by the thoughts in my head, I rose from the bed. “Well, if you’re fine with all of this, then there’s nothing more for me to say. I’m not Mitsuru, but I say do what you want.”

“Yeah. I will,” Kogetsu said with a smile. His words held neither enthusiasm nor deceit, so I thought it might be a good time to leave and put my hand on the door.

I then turned back, and he gave me a look that asked “What are you still doing here?” So I blurted out what had been on my mind all along. “If the Tsukuyomi family ever tosses you out, you can come make your debut with us. You’ve got a lot to offer.”

“Ha! I’ll pass! Go scout Ui if you want someone.”

“You’re right.” I nodded, laughing, and left his room.

Anyway, don’t expect me to keep calling you Kogetsu when you’re dressed like Chouko, I thought, feeling jittery as I left his house.

(((

“THE most important thing when it comes to dance is posture.”

For some reason, Aritomo’s lips were twitching.

“U-Um, Urara?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Uh, how long do I have to keep this up— Ugggh!”

Aritomo and I had just started our lessons in the studio Shinmyou had promised us, but already she was full of nothing but complaints. I decided to start by teaching her proper posture, since we were far from ready for a professional instructor.

“All we’re doing is standing still.”

“What kind of training is standing still for two hours?!”

It had only been an hour and a half.

“Come on now, your posture is important.”

Shimozuru nodded in agreement.

What was he doing here anyway? He must have noticed I was staring at him.

"You need a partner for your dance lessons, don't you?" he said, holding up his hand.

"Yes, we do, but is this really okay?"

I got the feeling we'd get an earful for having help from anyone other than our advisor.

"I got Saku's permission, so it's fine."

"Well, that's good."

"He owed me one."

I was a bit surprised to hear that, but the mischievous look on his face when he said it left me feeling as if I didn't want to press him any further.

"All right, Oboro, you do the lesson, too, then!" Aritomo commanded.

"Shimozuru's posture is good, so he doesn't need to practice," I stated.

"Whaat?!"

Her body seemed to be getting tired, but her mouth was moving just fine, so I decided she could handle another thirty minutes. I kept trying to encourage her, but I was also going to correct her when she needed it.

"You're a monster."

"Who is?"

"You are, Urara."

So I was. What we were doing was exactly what I had been forced to do as a young child first learning to dance. I hadn't realized it was so hard. Being a teacher is tough work.

"Aritomo, no leaning on the table for support."

It was time for a break, but that didn't mean she was allowed to slouch. As I was making tea at the tea corner they had provided us with, I decided to give her an etiquette lesson as well.

Her body trembled as she struggled to straighten out, but somehow, she managed.

"Hmph, I know, I know."

"Try not to hold your teacup in both hands."

"...Oh, shut UP already!"

It seemed that my kicking her while she was down had exhausted the last of her patience.

"I'm done for today!"

She leaped out of her chair and walked out the door of the studio, tottering as she went.

"Aritomo..."

Perhaps in my enthusiasm as a first time teacher, I had pushed her too hard.

"I'll go get her!" Shimosuru exclaimed and rushed after her.

Left alone in the studio, I heaved a sigh and cleaned up. I felt a pair of eyes on me from the door.

"Chouko..."

"Oh, Urara, are you alone? I brought you all some refreshments," she said, holding out a box of snacks. The moment I saw her, I burst into tears.

(((

"DON'T you think you're pushing just a bit too hard?" Lady Chouko asked, gently comforting me after my shameful outburst.

"You're probably right. Also..."

"Also?"

"This is a bit embarrassing, but this is the first time I've ever made a good friend. ...Perhaps I was too pushy."

I was happy to have something to teach my friend, and so I forced my lessons on her without considering her feelings.

I had been arrogant and suddenly felt very guilty about how I treated Aritomo. As I stewed in my own self-loathing, Lady Chouko stroked my hair.

"But, Urara, I thought I was your first real friend," she said, a bit sullen.

"Pardon...?"

"I asked to be your friend before she did... This is so not fair."

"No, wait..."

I mean, she was right. She had asked to be my friend first, and I had said yes. Somehow we ended up in this competition, encouraging each other on even as we were on opposite sides. As time went on, we got closer.

I would be too embarrassed to be so honest with her about the uglier parts of me and be comforted in return if we weren't real friends.

Even so, something didn't feel right about calling her just a friend. I gazed up at her, still mired in my own gloom, and realized that today, her long hair was pulled back in one ponytail and she was wearing a simple outfit with shorts. I wasn't used to seeing her out of her school uniform, so unexpectedly seeing her like this made me blush.

Her gaze as she peered directly into my face, with my cheeks reddening, was almost painful. Somehow I shook it off and told her how I felt.

"I'm sorry about the first-friend thing, Lady Chouko, but the truth is, I really like you!"

The second those words left my lips, her face glowed bright red, and with a smile that consumed her whole face, she responded, "Urara, so do I."

Her face was radiant, and I suddenly became very anxious, desperate to run away. She repeated my name again, making me even more flustered, and when I looked up, I realized her face was right in front of mine. Nervous, I squeezed my eyes shut. Just then—

"Urara! I'm sorry! Really sorry!"

“Aritomo?!”

Aritomo charged into the room, slamming the door behind her, and rushed right toward me.

“I won’t complain anymore, so please keep training me. I really will give it my all this time!” Aritomo said with tears in her eyes. Her words moved me. I apologized as well for pushing too hard, and we promised to both do our best from then on.

“Ah, sorry! I wanted everyone to make up, but I didn’t mean to interrupt! Please don’t get mad!” Shimozuru begged Lady Chouko.

While Aritomo and I were hugging things out, we heard a verbal cold war breaking out behind us, but I couldn’t be sure what exactly had happened.

We decided instead to make a new practice plan.

“Posture is still important, but we’ll only work on that at the beginning of each day, then I’ll check it for you throughout.”

“Okay then, let’s use the rest of our time to practice our steps.”

Lady Chouko and Shimozuru watched us make up with smiles on their faces.

After Aritomo had run off, Shimozuru had gone after her to make sure she was okay. He tried to make her see that even though I was a bit harsh with her, what I was telling her was right, and that I wasn’t doing it just to pick on her or anything.

I was incredibly grateful to Shimozuru for smoothing things out between us and helping her understand what I failed to explain.

When I tried to express my gratitude to him, smiling broadly, Lady Chouko insisted I was just being polite because he had helped us and that there was nothing more to it.

“No, I like him, too,” I insisted.

“You don’t have to go that far,” she pouted.

Lately, her moods had been shifting rapidly. Was I weird for finding that somehow endearing?

"Wait, Tsukuyomi, is it really okay for you to be here? Won't Saku get upset?"

It was a fair question.

"Oh, it's all right. He set up this place to practice dancing, didn't he? So why would he get mad about me being here?" she said, answering Aritomo's question with another question, though not necessarily one rooted in sound logic. I wasn't sure how the others felt, but I didn't think Shinmyou would agree. I just didn't want to see that volatile side of Lady Chouko again.

"Well, I can always step in if he has a problem," Shimosuru said.

"Part of the debt he owes you?" I asked.

"Guess so," he said with a wry grin. "That slip-up the day at the stables was pretty rough, y'know."

He must have been referring to what was said during the horseback riding incident.

I hadn't realized it was such a big secret. Aritomo knew as a result of the otome game, so I assumed it was just common knowledge.

"Do we really have to keep the fact that Tsukuyomi is heir to the family empire a secret?"

Why would Aritomo bring that up now? *You were asked to act as if you never heard any of that.*

Chouko and Shimosuru exchanged glances and chuckled.

"It's not that big of a deal, not to me at least," Lady Chouko said.

"What?! Then why was Shinmyou so upset about it?"

Shimosuru shrugged. "Saku seems to view it as earth-shattering if it gets out, but Chouko doesn't see it that way," he said nonchalantly.

"I don't get it," Aritomo responded.

“Hahaha, I know. But it would still be a pain if that info went public, so please keep it quiet. ...Especially for now,” Shimozuru said, putting a finger to Aritomo’s lips. As he did, her cheeks flushed. I pretended not to see that.

I brought out the tea set I had cleared away earlier and made a new pot of tea. With the snacks Lady Chouko brought along, we had a lovely afternoon tea party.

It was so relaxing that our troubles earlier seemed like a distant dream.

...Or at least they would have, if Shimozuru hadn’t started acting stranger and stranger.

“Besides, our group is full of flawed guys. One guy is smart but stuck in his stuffy ways, while another isn’t so intelligent but has a knack for things, while yet another is a good student but can’t read social cues. We’re just a group of problems.”

It seemed to be harsh criticism of his friends. He wasn’t naming names, but for the most part, we could tell who was who.

“Pff! What’s that supposed to mean? You’re acting so weird!” Aritomo, three times as cheerful as usual, cut in. Something was off about her, too. Concerned, I glanced at Lady Chouko, but she just tilted her head and stared back at me.

“Okay then, Oboro, what about you and Chouko? What about the Prince? How do you all stack up, then?”

Even the way Aritomo articulated her words was weird as she made a question mark gesture. She had even called Lady Chouko by her first name.

“Me? Well, I would be the boring one who has a knack for things. While Kogets—*cough, cough!*”

Lady Chouko cut him off before he could continue.

“What exactly are you trying to say, Oboro?”

Her lips were smiling, but her eyes definitely were not. She took her eyes off Shimozuru and instead inspected one of the chocolates she had brought as she spoke.

"Were these a little too strong, perhaps?"

"They're whiskey bon-bons, right? They were quite good."

In my past life, back in Lacrofine, we had chocolate treats with high alcoholic content like those, but these were much richer, full-bodied, and definitely tastier as well.

"Urara, you can really handle your alcohol, can't you?" Lady Chouko said, glancing at me.

She sounded a little disappointed, but she was handling hers just as well. Almost too well.

"Well, what shall we do now?"

Aritomo and Shimozuru seemed to have talked themselves out, both suddenly falling flat on the table, apparently passed out.

"I suppose that's it for today's practice, then. I'll call Aritomo's family. Can you take care of Shimozuru, please?"

After clearing off the table, Lady Chouko suddenly grabbed my hand.

"Do you have to go home now?"

The way she asked me, her eyes gazing up into mine pleadingly, made my heart pound. The shorts she wore today in lieu of her school uniform really looked good on her.

"I'm heading home. I mean, there's no point in staying..." I replied, glancing at the door, but Lady Chouko continued to stare at me. She hesitated for a second.

"...Urara, why don't we have a dance?"

"...Chouko...can you dance?"

I had been caught off guard by her request, so my response had been equally as strange. Mochizuki said she didn't dance, but that didn't exactly mean she *couldn't* dance.

She had a difficult time with horseback riding because she didn't get along well with animals. But with a little bit of practice, she was a capable rider, so it was clear she wasn't lacking athletic skills. Actually, Mikazuki had insisted there

were no sports other than horseback riding where Aritomo and I even had a chance against her.

Which meant that the only reason Lady Chouko hadn't danced up to this point was because she didn't want to.

Even so, why was she asking me to dance now? While my head teemed with these questions, my heart could focus on only one thing.

"You'd dance with me?" I asked her. As I did, she squeezed my hand tighter.

"I want to dance with you, Urara."

The way she looked into my eyes made my face flush with heat.

As I gazed back at her, I realized her face was turning red, too. Her expression made me feel a bit bashful. I nodded back at her, and the second I did, I realized something.

"Oh! But we can't!"

"Huh? Why not?" she asked, sounding shocked.

It wasn't that I didn't want to. It was just...

"I hardly remember the steps for the guy part..."

Even if she could dance, there was no way Lady Chouko could manage the male part, right? Which meant the role would fall to me, and while I had done it for fun, I hadn't practiced it all that much.

"I'll practice the steps for that part on my own, so why don't we try it another day?" I suggested, but Lady Chouko responded by placing her hand on her forehead and murmuring something. What was she saying? When she gazed up at me, it was as if she was peering into my soul.

"U-Urara!" she exclaimed.

"Y—"

"Hey! Your ride home is here."

Another interruption. It seemed as though today was just not our day.

I looked in the direction of the voice and saw Mochizuki leaning against the wall with his arms folded for some reason.

“Mitsuru, what are you doing here?!”

“Did you not hear me? I came to take you home.”

“I didn’t ask you to,” Lady Chouko replied, sounding pouty, but Mochizuki didn’t seem to care. He strode over to the table and smacked Shimosuru on the cheek a few times to wake him up.

“Saku figured you would make your way here and asked me to come get you. You didn’t forget about the party tonight, did you?” he asked as he lent Shimosuru, who was still moaning in his sleep, his shoulder and dragged him to his feet.

“I didn’t...forget.”

Lady Chouko seemed as if she couldn’t care less about the party, but I implored her in my heart to keep her promise.

“Chouko, I promise I’ll practice, so let’s dance together next time.”

“Urara...”

“I’ll give it my all,” I said, clenching my fist with resolve. She heaved a resigned sigh.

“All right, then... But you really don’t have to practice, okay?”

“Why not?”

“Chouko, we need to go. The car is waiting,” Mochizuki pressed.

I thanked Lady Chouko.

“Somehow I always get the short end of the stick.”

Was that how he felt? Mochizuki’s words didn’t match his usual assertive demeanor, but I knew it might be tough for him, being entangled with Lady Chouko the way he was.

(((

“HEY, Kirara. Do you remember any of the dance steps I taught you when we were little?”

"Hwha? Ah...dance steps. Oh yeah. Maybe? I'm not sure."

We had just finished dinner and were having salted rice cakes for dessert. Kirara chewed hers thoughtfully as she tilted her head. However, there was no confidence in her words.

When Kirara was a little girl and dreamed of being a princess, I would teach her simple dance steps. It was just for fun, but she seemed to enjoy it. Thinking back on those times made me realize I really had been harsh with Aritomo in comparison. I felt awful about it.

I had hoped that if Kirara remembered, she could help me practice the guy part, but that didn't seem possible.

That's too bad, I thought, tilting my head. All of a sudden, someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"What is it, Haruto?"

"I remember."

That was quite a shock.

Sure, I had taught him as well as Kirara, but it was more of a game for us. Still, it made me happy to hear that he remembered. He showed me the holding pose. His form was quite good.

"But what I need to practice is the guy part."

"Come again?"

"Huh? What do you mean? Why?"

The two of them leaped on my response with rapt interest, but I didn't see it as that big of a deal.

"I'm going to be dancing with a friend," I responded.

"Ohh," Kirara said flatly, and her attention drifted instead to an idol on the TV.

Haruto, however, looked unhappy.

"Are you...gonna be dancing with that Tsukuyomi friend of yours?"

Another surprise from Haruto. Come to think of it, he met her once. Still, did it really matter if I was?

“That’s right. What if I am?” I asked, trying to add a hint of mystery.

“No...never mind,” he responded, something lingering unsaid just beyond his words.

(((

In the end, Lady Chouko and I weren’t able to have our dance.

“It was Saku’s decision to tell Mitsuru,” Shimozuru said in frustration, scratching his head apologetically. “Mitsuru said that as long as it’s only you two, it won’t get around. So just make sure not to tell anyone else. Not like I would have expected him to admit he was wrong,” he grumbled.

I understood then that Lady Chouko had been told to stay away, but was it really okay for Shimozuru to be here?

“Yeah, he said I could help out as Aritomo’s partner,” he said when I asked him.

We did need partners.

Summer break was well underway, so we practiced in the dance studio from the morning onward. Shimozuru was filling us in as we were doing our calisthenics.

He was clearly ready to fulfill his partner duties, showing up that day in a neat white shirt and black pants. It was an oddly appropriate complement to Aritomo’s loud pink jersey that would make anyone’s eyes sting.

Meanwhile, I was wearing a long, slightly worn cotton dress, but I figured it would be fine for dance practice.

“Aw, just you, Oboro? Then who will be Urara’s partner?”

Good point. Our teacher would be coming for one hour each day for the next week in the afternoons, but...

“...You don’t want to know...” He glanced my way with a guilty look in his eyes.

At that moment, a stern voice spoke up from by the door.

"I will handle that task."

I recognized that voice and turned to see it was indeed Shinmyou. He looked a bit mysterious with his black shirt and black pants, an ensemble that gave him a sense of allure.

"I am your advisor, after all."

"Hmph. You are our advisor...but I still don't know if I trust you," Aritomo said, her words accusatory.

"It doesn't matter if you trust me or not. You still require a partner."

That first part was directed at Aritomo, the latter part at me. With that, he held out his left hand. It was difficult for me to accept it without hesitation.

After all, I still hadn't forgotten the pain that left hand had caused. However, thinking about how Lady Chouko and Mochizuki had punished him for it, I couldn't just balk at his offer, either.

After giving it some thought, I took a step forward and faced him.

"Honestly, you haven't done a very good job earning my trust. But if we're to be partners, I do need to be able to put my faith in you. So...can you rebuild my trust?" I asked, offering my right hand.

Shinmyou wrinkled his brow for a moment before returning to his normal, cold expression and offering me his right hand instead.

"At the very least, I believe we can reach an understanding as dance partners. ...Let's work hard together."

His words didn't seem very sincere. I accepted them just the same, but even so, I was feeling skeptical.

After learning the basic steps, we took advantage of the fact that we had partners and got straight to actual practice. I split my time on practicing and keeping an eye on Aritomo, as she was as reckless as ever. Still, I didn't want to stumble into the same rut as last time.

"Please try to remember your posture while you're performing each step."

"Yes, ma'am."

I watched her but tried to minimize my comments. Getting the posture right was more important than the steps. We practiced the steps over and over in triple time. After a while, Aritomo's arms and shoulders started to droop.

"Doesn't instill confidence, does it?" Shinmyou commented in a prickly tone.

"I disagree," I insisted. "Shimozuru supports her very well. And they both look like they are enjoying themselves."

"...Pretty sure this is supposed to be a competition, not a dance in the park," Shinmyou shot back.

"All the more reason."

The two of them chatted happily, seemingly having a good time practicing.

The point of this contest wasn't dancing as a competitive sport. I was sure that even someone with a discerning eye like our judge, Mochizuki, would prefer we made the dancing look easy over the minute details of each step.

I brought up the time with Mikazuki with a laugh, and immediately, Shinmyou got a sour look on his face.

"...You really have a way of annoying me," he grumbled.

Oh, well, I hadn't intended to. After all, I have my own reservations about you as well. I was beginning to regret having him as a partner, as it seemed unlikely he would win back my trust.

At that moment, Shinmyou offered me his right hand. "Would you do me the honor of this dance?" he asked, trying in his own way to lighten the mood. I had been so preoccupied looking after Aritomo that I hadn't had a chance to dance with him yet.

He certainly came across as someone who knew how to escort a lady. According to Aritomo, Shinmyou was the sexy

love interest, so I could see how he made the otome gamers swoon with lines like this.

"Yes. I look forward to dancing with you." I accepted his hand without hesitation. He, however, seemed perplexed by my open acceptance. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Aren't you afraid I'll try something again?" he asked.

Compared with the things I got into in my past life, things that could result in my being cut down with a sword, there was little here that frightened me.

"The only thing I fear you could do to me here is step on my feet," I responded honestly. "And that isn't much to fear at all. So no, I'm not afraid."

His narrowed eyes opened wide, and he bent over, holding his stomach as he laughed.

"Ah...right. Sorry to have asked. I'll do my best not to step on your feet," he said, pulling me into his arms.

The cold attitude Shinmyou had toward me up to that day seemed to have relaxed a bit, and it made me wonder if he had really undergone a change of heart in such a short time.

"Spin like a mummy..." I thought I heard Shimozuru saying under his breath behind me, but I elected instead to focus on my own practice.

"Urara...you're incredible..." Aritomo said in awe.

"Yeah. You're really good," Shimozuru agreed. "Like a pro."

We were supposed to only be practicing our steps, but with my partner taking the lead, the steps flowed more and more naturally.

"It's because Shinmyou is such a good leader," I said.

In ballroom dancing, the male lead could make or break a dance, so if it seemed as though I was doing a good job, it was actually a reflection of Shinmyou's skill. Actually, dancing with him was quite a pleasure. No wonder he was the love interest with the most sex appeal.



"No, you deserve credit as well," Shinmyou chimed in. "This is the first time dancing with someone has been so enjo...so smooth for me."

"No, no, it really is because of your prowess as the leader."

"...Not at all, really, you..."

"Aww, enough, enough! Stop trying to 'out-modest' each other!"

I wanted to respond that it wasn't modesty, but Shimozuru had already pulled Shinmyou away in a panic, so it was clear the conversation was done.

I could hear some unsettling words of inquiry, so perhaps this way was better. Luckily, as all that was going on, the dance teacher arrived and began instructing Aritomo and me.

"This is how a professional teaches," I said, thinking back on the mistakes I made during my earlier lessons. Our partners also joined us in our lessons. "It's good that she's been pointing out my flaws, too, so I can try to improve them during practice."

"Flaws? Impossible for one who dances as well as you do."

Yes. No matter how vital dance was for nobles like myself in my past life, I still was no professional.

Especially since Shinmyou was twenty centimeters taller than I was. Even with heels, there would still be a considerable height difference. The teacher warned me to be diligent in standing up straight while dancing with him. They caught me trying to stretch to match his height and warned me accordingly.

In my past life, most of my partners were shorter than I was.

My heart was suddenly overcome with nostalgia. Being called Annerosa, having partners who insisted I dance only with them...and after that, I...

"Hey, Urara, do you know that guy?"

“Pardon?!”

Aritomo’s voice brought me back to the present.

That hardly ever happened to me, but whenever I reminisced about my past life, it was as if part of my consciousness were spirited away.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t paying attention,” I said, offering an honest apology.

“Like I said, do you know him?” she repeated with a huff and jabbed her thumb at the door. Through the glass, I spied a familiar jersey.

“Haruto!”

“Who?” Aritomo responded in confusion as the door was yanked open. Standing there was my younger brother.

“Big Sister.”

“What are you doing here?”

I remembered telling him about the dance lessons but didn’t think I had told him where. I hadn’t intended to hide it, but since we were all practicing here, it would be inappropriate for a member of my family to show up.

I couldn’t hide the dissatisfaction in my voice, but Haruto was unaffected. He merely continued glancing around.

“Haruto?!”

I called out to him in a louder voice than before, and finally he looked at me.

“Where is he?”

“He who? Who are you looking for? No one is here but my friends and me.”

I wasn’t comfortable referring to Shinmyou as a friend, but it would have to do for now. How does that saying go? “The friend of my friend is also my friend”?

Haruto glanced at Shinmyou and narrowed his eyes.

“Haruto, let’s step out for a bit. We don’t want to disturb the others. They can’t practice with outsiders here,” I said, tugging on his sleeve, but he showed no intention of leaving.

I pulled on his sleeve once more, but peering into his wide eyes, I could see they were fixed on someone.

“Sakutarou...?”

“Do you know Shinmyou, Haruto?”

He had addressed Shinmyou by name. When Shinmyou spun around and looked at him, the wrinkles on Shinmyou’s forehead deepened and he heaved a small sigh.

Haruto stepped onto the dance floor without waiting for permission and planted himself in front of Shinmyou, glaring up at him.

Shimozuru was standing right next to him, and from the sullen look on his face, he seemed to understand what was happening here as well.

Still, Haruto was my younger brother, so I couldn’t have him disrupting everyone without cause. I rushed over to him and urged him to return home, but he merely continued to square off against Shinmyou without looking at me. This was the first time he had ever ignored me like this. I was aghast at his behavior.

“It’s been a while,” Shinmyou said to him gently. “Are you stronger now?”

“Stronger than you, Sakutarou.”

“Hmph. Even stronger than Ui?”

“I could probably take him.”

“You’re certainly confident.”

They were...talking about kendo, right? Haruto had been attending a kendo dojo since elementary school, so if they knew each other from there, this would all make sense, but...

“Anyway, where is he?”

“...He? To whom are you referring?”

There didn’t seem to be fond feelings of nostalgia between them.

“Can I say his name? Can I say it...in front of her?”

Who on earth was he talking about?

“Ahh, you guys, this is a touching reunion and all, but it’s time for everyone to go home.”

Shimozuru didn’t seem terribly sorry about breaking them up, but he was right. It was three p.m., and it seemed a good time to stop for the day.

However, neither Shinmyou nor Haruto seemed keen to take their eyes off the other. And it didn’t seem as though they were planning to forget about whomever they were discussing.

I reached out, ready to drag Haruto away so we could leave, but just then, someone else pulled my other arm in the opposite direction.

“All right then, Urara and I are leaving. You boys do what you want.”

“What? A-Aritomo?”

“Don’t forget to lock up, now!” Aritomo called out and dragged me off to the locker room.

“A-Ah, wait, Aritomo. I need to talk to Haruto...”

“Oh, it’s fine, it’s fine. I’ve got things of my own to talk to you about, so let’s go have some tea.”

She had my arm in a viselike grip. There was no way I could say no now.

Chapter 7: The Lady Has a Meeting

ARITOMO had her driver take us to her house for tea.

Seeing her enormous mansion surrounded by a vast yard and ornate gate made me truly realize just how rich Aritomo actually was.

The way she carried herself didn't lend itself to that image, but her manor made me rethink my preconceptions. I felt guilty for misjudging her.

Aritomo led me up to her spacious, well-adorned room, where we were quickly served tea.

"Welcome to our home. Oh my, Shizuku, you never told me you had such a lovely friend," her mother said, greeting me with a simple smile.

"Pleasure to meet you. I'm Urara Tendou. I apologize for showing up unannounced," I replied.

"We're fine, Mom," Aritomo said, taking the tea and chasing her mother out of the room. Her mother looked disappointed, as if she had more to say.

"Your mother seems lovely. And your house is wonderful. It's so big."

"Really? Thanks. I mean, Mom's kinda chatty, but I'm happy to hear you like it here," Aritomo said flippantly, but she was blushing. It was clear to me she and her mother had a good relationship. Her eyes twinkled as she gave a broad grin. "The truth is, this place is pretty small for someone attending St. Delia's."

Really? If that was true, what would people think of my house? Based on what I saw earlier, mine was likely the size of her garage.

Without question, my house had to be the smallest of any student's at St. Delia's.

Well, I am a commoner, so it's just right for me. I drank my tea as I continued turning those thoughts over in my mind.

The tea hit the spot after working up a sweat. I know it wasn't polite, but I drank it in one go. I heaved a satisfied sigh.

"Hey, Urara," Aritomo began, her face serious.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Who exactly...are you?"

It was a good thing I had finished drinking. If I'd had any tea left in my mouth, I'd have spewed it back out.

"Wh-Who am I...? I don't know how else to respond but with my name..."

"Yeah, I know your name. I found that much out during my investigation."

The way she said "investigation" so bluntly amazed me.

I knew people couldn't understand why I carried myself the way I did without due cause, but I also didn't think it so strange that it merited an inquest.

"I'm sorry for looking into you without asking," she said, gazing up at me.

"It's in the past..." I said, unsure of how else to respond.

"Look, this isn't something I would normally do to a friend... It was before we saw each other as friends, so it really doesn't count, now, does it?"

I truly appreciated her candor.

"It's just, you were such a mystery to me. I mean, Tsukuyomi and the others likely researched you more than I did."

"Uh-huh..."

Shinmyou had suggested I was hiding something. Surely he had been checking into my background as well.

"It's an undeniable truth that you were born and raised a commoner. But you act so refined. I think anyone would find that strange."

Perhaps...

"I mean, how can you dance so well when you've never studied it before?"

...it's time...

"So I just have to ask..."

...to tell her.

"Who in the world..."

I quickly stood up before she could finish.

I grabbed the hem of my old dress. Bending deep at the waist and lowering my head to her as elegantly as possible, I introduced myself, speaking as clearly as possible.

"I...I am Annerosa Ortegado. In my past life, I was the eldest daughter of Count Ortegado of the Kingdom of Lacrofine, in a world apart from our current one."

There was only complete silence and stillness.

Aritomo's eyes were like saucers. She clearly had not expected an answer like this. Her mouth opened and closed rapidly. Was she breathing okay? I awaited her reaction, concerned and unable to move.

"Did you hear me...? Aritomo...?"

I couldn't stand the silence for very long and so tried to prod a response out of her. She held up her left hand, signaling for me to give her a moment.

She lifted her yet untouched tea with her right hand and drained the cup in one gulp.

"Huhhh?! Hey, this is roasted green tea!"

Yes... I, too, had been surprised her mother had used a tiny teacup for roasted green tea.

"Aw, come on, what are you doing, Mom?! Make us black tea next time!"

She leaped to her feet, her cheeks bright red, but the look on her face told me she likely wasn't genuinely angry.

"Well, it was delicious. Your mother is quite good at making tea."

"...Well, if you say so, Urara... Ah well..." She flopped down on her sofa for one and gave a long sigh. "I see. I

thought that might be the case.”

I don’t know if it was the roasted green tea that had calmed her, but she was finally returning to her usual self.

“I considered that possibility when nothing came of my investigation. That maybe the reason you weren’t telling me anything was because you had been reincarnated like I had.”

It was natural only because we were in the same situation. It wasn’t something that would normally come out.

“It was just, how do I put this...? You didn’t seem to have some ulterior motive for behaving the way you did, and though you quickly got caught up in what I was doing, you didn’t behave like a usual NPC.”

Oh, so she actually realized she was dragging me into things?

“But I never...NEVER expected that you had also been reincarnated from a completely different world. ...Pf...haha!”

“Right. I never thought I’d been reincarnated into an otome game, either. ...Hahaha!”

We both glanced at each other and immediately burst into laughter.

Neither of us could stop laughing for a long while.

“Well, speaking of your life in another world, the fact that you were actual nobility makes you the very definition of a lady.”

The very definition?

“I’m not making fun of you. It just means you’re the ultimate example, a perfect lady.”

It felt strange being called that. After all, in this life, I was born and raised a commoner.

I looked out of the corner of my eye and realized she was staring at me.

“You do have an uncanny talent for dance, horseback riding, and piano, but it’s your manners that are especially perfect. The way you exude elegance, no matter how hard

you insist you're just a commoner, no one will ever completely believe you."

She was as good at reading my mind as ever.

"Hmm... Still..."

"Yeah! No matter how much I looked into your background, all I could find was proof that you were nothing more than a commoner. That's why everyone is so baffled."

I knew that. That was why Shinmyou treated me with such reservations.

"So does that mean everyone views me with suspicion?"

The thought made me a bit sad.

Lady Chouko...that's right. Lady Chouko said she wanted me to explain it to her someday. Had she asked me that because she was skeptical of me? The thought alone made my heart ache.

"Wha? I don't think that's the case," she said, quickly denying it. "I think they're curious because they don't understand you, but that doesn't necessarily mean they find you suspicious."

"I see."

"Saku acted weird toward you because, well, that's who he is. Probably."

Who he was? I didn't want to push too hard, so I sat silently listening to Aritomo's appraisal of the situation. Lately I had been realizing she tended to be spot-on about many things.

"But, I mean, I guess most people wouldn't believe you if you told them you were reincarnated, so I guess you gotta be a little vague. You know, revel in that sense of mystery."

...I stand corrected.

"...Wh-What?!" she asked when I eyed her funny.

"No, I'm just amazed at how quickly you told me," I said with a laugh.

She clicked her tongue. "But it worked out, right? I mean, neither of us have any other friends we could spill our guts to about this stuff, right?"

“That’s true...”

“Right! Well, that’s enough of that for now. I’m satisfied just knowing how it is you can be the very definition of a proper lady. Let’s focus on enjoying the last challenge for now,” she said, sounding exhilarated. Then she used a phone in her room to call for more tea.

I had also kept the truth of my reincarnation locked away inside, so being able to actually share it with someone left me feeling lighter, too.

However, I still wasn’t sure whether it was safe to tell Lady Chouko. Maybe it was better to keep it to myself as Aritomo suggested for now? When I tried to picture how she might respond, my chest began to hurt.

I shook my head, trying desperately to clear away the gloom forming in my heart, and then I remembered the argument that had broken out between the boys. I had been whisked away by Aritomo, but what happened to Haruto?

“Sometimes it’s best to let boys settle things among themselves. They get so caught up, they probably wouldn’t even notice if we tried to step in.”

“...You’re right.”

They had been discussing someone I must not have known. If I had poked around for more information about this old guy friend, I might have only made things worse.

“Sometimes it’s best not to pry.”

“Right. Just let it be. They might all be better off if we do.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“More importantly, let’s talk about our dance steps.”

As we sat drinking our refilled tea and eating the snacks that had been delivered, we began chatting about dancing. We were both getting excited.

But I couldn’t let my concerns about Haruto and the others go.

(((

FOR some time after my big reveal, I spent my days focusing only on dance.

Aritomo might have lacked a certain elegance, but between her natural enthusiasm and stellar reflexes, she was becoming a fairly capable dancer.

"It's because I have such a great partner."

"Don't you mean 'It's because I have such a great teacher'?"

Aritomo and I teased one another. She actually seemed to be having so much fun. It made me happy that Shimozuru had agreed to be her partner.

"What...about you?" asked a slightly restrained voice from beside me as I watched the other two dance with a smile.

"Oh...yes, I feel the same. Thanks to my wonderful partner, I've gotten so much better."

"Oh? Well, good," Shinmyou said matter-of-factly, though he wouldn't look me in the eye as we continued to dance.

Was it too much to ask for a little eye contact, even if it wasn't as much as with Aritomo and Shimozuru? I tilted my head up a bit, causing the clueless Shinmyou to ask me what was wrong.

I wanted to tell him it was nothing, but then I remembered the other day.

"Oh, I was just wondering, how did you know Haruto?"

I had tried to nonchalantly ask Haruto about it the other day, but he readily brushed it off. I couldn't tell if it was because of that incident, but ever since, any time our eyes met, he quickly looked away.

I didn't want to cause any trouble, so perhaps it would have been better to wait for a more appropriate opportunity

to ask Shinmyou, but I couldn't help myself. However, something felt off in his response.

"...We used to take lessons together."

Was that all it took to create such animosity? I pressed further.

"You mean kendo? Did you enjoy it?"

"I did."

His words were clipped, but at least I received a response. Come to think of it, I remember meeting several other students at one of my brother's promotion ceremonies. Maybe I even met him back then. Just as I was about to suggest the idea, Aritomo pounced on me and I toppled backward.

"Urara! Let's go look at dresses!"

"Aritomo! Wh-What?! Dresses?"

"Yes, Oboro hooked us up with some good stuff!"

Dresses?! My mouth dropped open.

"My cousin's boutique has some waiting for you two, so go pick one out," Shimosuru said, laughing.

"They're Arrows gowns, Urara! I've always wanted to try one!"

Aritomo grabbed me by the hand and dragged me off. As much as I wanted to protest, that didn't seem appropriate, considering someone had gone to all the trouble to arrange this for us.

"We have ten days until the dance contest. We can't exactly custom-order dresses at this point, but we were able to find several already made in your size, so please don't be shy."

The way Shimosuru said this so easily, with a broad grin, made me realize he really was from a totally different world. Just as the way Aritomo readily accepted someone offering her a free gown made me realize how rich she was. And the way I felt that I couldn't accept something so expensive...made it clear I was definitely a commoner.

WE parted ways with Shinmyou, who had plans of his own, and made our way to the shop with Shimozuru as our guide.

We reached a posh district along one of the main roads in town, with high-end shops lining its streets. They were clearly high-class without being gaudy. Finally, we reached a particularly glamorous boutique.

Having just changed out of the clothes I practiced in, I still felt horribly underdressed. I wondered if I should just go home and avoid the embarrassment, but before I could, Aritomo excitedly grabbed my arm.

“Urara, look at that! It’s so pretty!” she exclaimed, her eyes fixed on an ornate wedding dress displayed right in the front of the shop.

Layers of lace were intricately embroidered with delicate flowers, and several pearls dotted the dress. Were they real? There was no way I would touch them. If I got them dirty, it would be a financial catastrophe.

I tried to maintain an inoffensive smile to keep my emotions from showing.

“Oboro, how have you been?!” a loud voice called from within.

“It’s been forever, Kiyoharu.”

“I told you to call me Sei!” The young man laughed heartily as he chatted comfortably with Shimozuru.

But was this man with ample facial hair really Shimozuru’s cousin?

“Oh, let me introduce you all. This is my cousin, Kiyoharu Agatsuru. Kiyoharu, this is Shizuku Aritomo and Urara Tendou.”

“Enchantée, I am this boutique’s owner-cum-designer, Sei. What lovely young ladies you both are.”

I wasn’t used to being around people like him. But that smile of his reminded me of Shimozuru, so I felt at ease.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Urara Tendou.”

I extended my right hand to shake his. He then turned to Aritomo, just as her mouth dropped open and a loud shout filled the room.

“This grizzly man...is the designer of Arrows?!”

Aritomo! That’s incredibly rude!

The man artfully ignored her extremely crass words and guided us to one of his salons for customers. Inside we found a massive antique couch. There was also a marble-top table with delicate cabriole legs. A lush, fluffy carpet completed the attractive ensemble.

It really felt as if we had entered the world of some A-list celebrity.

That feeling only increased when they brought us tea.

“But, honestly, *grizzly* is such a mean word,” I said after we’d had a moment to collect ourselves.

“But he is grizzly.”

“That’s why I told you to ditch the beard,” Shimozuru pressed his cousin, the two of them laughing lightheartedly.

Perhaps realizing she had said too much, Aritomo did not join in their conversation, merely sipping her tea instead. But she was too quiet for my liking. It worried me. After continuing their banter for a bit, the cousins finally turned their attention back our way.

“Now then, I know you girls need dresses to dance in, but tell me about your preferences,” the grizzly ma—I mean Mr. Agatsuru said to us.

“I want something glamorous,” Aritomo said, lifting her head and emphatically raising her hand. “I want the train as long as you can make it, like the nobility of long ago! Right, Urara?”

What was she trying to do?

“Oh, that sounds like a good look for you. How about a late baroque-style dress? Shall I try to find one for you?”

I nodded along, but I didn’t think I wanted something that extravagant.

Before I could say anything, dresses were being ferried over to us on hangers.

As Aritomo excitedly pulled out one dress after another, I could tell there was no stopping her. This was going to be a nightmare...for me.

Shimozuru was suddenly beside me. I shot him a pleading look, and he merely shook his head.

"Sorry. Once she gets like this, there's nothing I can do to stop her. Think you can play along for now?"

A feeling of dread seeped out of every pore in my body.

A rhythm formed where I was handed a dress and would try it on, take it off, and repeat. After losing count of how many dresses I had tried on, I felt exhausted.

To my pleasant surprise, the panniers weren't as ostentatious as I feared and the corsets weren't as restrictive, either. Technology in this world really was a marvel. I was feeling a little touched as Aritomo and Mr. Agatsuru began discussing another dress.

"Mmm, I think the pink is probably better."

"Agreed. Pink is your color, Urara."

Pink...?

"Um, I prefer something a little more subdued than pink..." I said, voicing my opinion on the matter.

"Huh, no way! Pink is absolutely your color, Urara!" Aritomo asserted.

"Subdued colors are for the mundanes. Pink is more fitting for a flower such as yourself. Trust this old pro. All right, next."

Mr. Agatsuru then handed me a dress that was a deep shade of pink adorned with delicate lace and accentuated with several ribbons.

As I accepted the dress, it filled me with a sense of déjà vu.

"Yeah, that looks good," Shimozuru said, somehow still not tired of all this. "That reminds me—Chouko likes pink, so I bet she would love that."

What? Lady Chouko likes pink? I was a bit surprised. I always felt she preferred things with an air of sophistication. I told Shimozuru as much.

"Oh, I didn't mean to wear. She likes looking at pink. So I bet she'd be happy if she saw you in that dress."

...She liked looking at pink. It felt like a strange choice, but if she would like it, perhaps it was worth a try.

"Well, I'll give it a try," I said and turned to head for the dressing room. As I did, I saw Shimozuru strike a triumphant pose out of the corner of my eye.

When I emerged from the dressing room, all eyes were on me. My heart thundered in my chest.

"That's perfect for you! Urara, you look totally cute!"

"Yes, this is the one. How does it feel? The waist is a little loose, isn't it? Maybe we should hem the length so it'll be easier to dance in."

I hadn't said anything, yet everyone was acting as if it was a sure thing. The person who had helped me change, as well as several other helpers who seemingly appeared out of nowhere, had their hands all over me, adjusting the dress. It reminded me of the maids who pecked at me from every angle before attending a ball at the castle.

"I can't accept such an expensive dress, though, especially not from such a place as luxurious as this," I said, but Shimozuru waved me off.

"It's fine, it's fine. We'll take care of it, Tendou."

What was I to do?

"It's fine, Urara. You should just accept their generosity."

"I still don't feel right about this."

Once Aritomo had selected a showy orange dress and they had arranged for necessary modifications, our mission for the day had been accomplished. Shimozuru needed to talk to his cousin, so they left the salon to allow us to get ready to head home.

While we were changing, I told Aritomo how I was feeling, but she agreed with Shimozuru. It would seem I was

alone in my reservations.

"More importantly, when I went to the bathroom, I noticed the door to the room next door was open, so I peeked inside, and you wouldn't believe it! I saw the most gorgeous dress in there!"

"Aritomo, you shouldn't go poking around like that."

"Aw, come on. I mean, we're at the Arrows boutique. I had to see what kind of dresses they had."

I fixed her with a cold stare, and she gradually lowered her voice.

Just as I was about to chide her for the error of her ways, she cupped her right hand to her ear.

"Aritomo?"

"Shh! Quiet!"

"Okay!" I said reflexively, then shut my mouth. I could hear two people arguing.

Aritomo beckoned me forth with her index finger, and I followed her out of the changing room. We opened the door of the salon and peered out into the hallway, where we could hear two voices even more belligerent than before.

"...is...I said..."

"No...I...se..."

They were arguing in the room next door.

"No way! That's the room where I saw the super-glamorous dress. Wonder what they're saying."

"Let's not, Aritomo. It's wrong to stick our noses in other people's business."

I pulled on her arm as she was about to peek into that neighboring room, but unfortunately my strength was no match for hers. She, in return, pulled harder. As she did, the door banged open, and we both pitched forward, toppling straight through. Now we were in trouble.

I held my breath and glanced in the direction of the voices. They must not have noticed us, as their argument only seemed to heat up.

"Shut up!"

With an ear-piercing shout, a girl drove her fist into a man's solar plexus.

The one doing the punching was, without question, Lady Chouko. And even though we couldn't see his face, the one sinking to the floor was definitely Mochizuki.

"Wh-Wh-What?!"

My accidental shout was what finally got Lady Chouko's attention. She, Aritomo, and I were locked in a three-way stare-down as she froze in place, her fist still balled up.

"Wha... Urara, why are you here?"

"Chouko...?"

"Ts-Tsukuyomi? Huh? Wha?"

I hadn't seen Lady Chouko since that first day of dance practice.

And just as on that day, seeing her in a simple shirt and pants made her look all the grander. Normally, if we unexpectedly ran into each other like this, we would run up to each other happily and start chatting, but this time was different. I was hesitant to say anything, left instead merely to stand and stare.

Mochizuki moved first, groaning from the punch Lady Chouko had given him. He writhed on the ground before pounding on it, and finally, the rest of us moved toward him.

"Are you all right?" I ran over to him, offering a handkerchief, as he let out a loud cough.

"It's all right, Urara. Just leave that jerk alone."

"No, no, I can't do that."

I ignored Lady Chouko as she looked down at Mochizuki doubled over in pain, and I checked on him.

"Hey, Tsukuyomi, you went too far," Aritomo said, joining me to help Mochizuki.

"This is normal for us," she spat flippantly, but clearly she had gone too far.

"Chouko..." I didn't know why she had done it, and I knew I had no right to say anything, but such brutal, one-sided violence was unacceptable.

I didn't know how to tell her that, but staring into her eyes caused her to look about frantically, flustered, before she finally looked up and muttered something.

Finally, she dropped her gaze to Mochizuki, sullen, and said, "I'm...sorry."

"If you're, *cough*, just gonna apologize anyway...then how about not hitting me in the first place?" Mochizuki said once he had calmed down enough to be able to talk. He started staggering to the middle of the salon to rest for a bit.

Aritomo and I were struggling to move him, so we wanted to use the salon phone to call Shimozuru, but Lady Chouko helped him instead.

"Chouko, you sure are strong," I said, but she waved the compliment off. Come to think of it, hadn't Aritomo said something similar before during our preparations for the cooking contest?

She set Mochizuki down rather violently, then reached for the phone to call someone herself.

"Urara, look. Look at this!"

Aritomo had lowered her voice to a whisper, as if trying to share a secret with me. When I looked over, I saw a breathtakingly beautiful white gown on display.

It was adorned with intricate roses and layers of dainty lace. Among all the dresses in this top-level boutique, this one had to be the *crème de la crème*.

But that wasn't the only thing I found shocking.

"Doesn't this remind you of something...?" Aritomo whispered.

"It does..."

A dress this long with an extensive lace train clearly wasn't for dancing in.

This was...a...

"This is practically a wedding dress."

A wedding dress...

Aritomo's words dug into my heart.

She was right. The dress standing before us was, without a doubt, a wedding dress.

And the only people occupying this room were Lady Chouko and Mochizuki. That beautiful dress wordlessly told me everything I needed to know.

As I stared at the dress in disbelief, Lady Chouko's cool voice brought me back to my senses.

"Oboro and the Bear are on their way. Once they arrive, you should go on— ...Urara? ...Are you crying?"

Upon hearing Lady Chouko's worried voice, I realized for the first time that, yes, I was crying.

Huh? ...But why...? I blinked repeatedly in shock as the tears lingering on my lower eyelids began to overflow.

"Urara! Here, use this..." Lady Chouko quickly pulled a handkerchief from her pants pocket.

But that immaculate white piece of fabric reminded me too much of the wedding dress, and I knocked her hand away in shock.

It caught all of us off guard. Me, Lady Chouko, and Aritomo, who had been observing us. How could this be? Why...why was this happening?! I couldn't stem the flow of feelings welling up inside me.

I...I...

"Give me a break, Chouko. We finally managed to work out a time..."

The door opened and I dashed toward it.

I pushed past Shimozuru and charged out of the room.

I could hear someone calling after me, but there was nothing anyone could say to convince me to stay. I couldn't bear to face her feeling like this.

I quickly made my way out of the store and rushed off toward home. I ran as fast as I could, desperate to get as far away as possible. But my legs weren't quick enough, and when I stopped for breath, someone grabbed my right hand.

"*Huff*, wait, c'mon...what was all that about? What happened back there?!" Aritomo shouted at me, panting. As

usual, she didn't mince words, but the look in her eyes told me she was genuinely worried about me.

Her kindness invited another wave of tears. I accepted the handkerchief she offered and diligently dabbed my eyes.

I needed to be stronger so my emotions would stop overtaking me like this.

Much stronger.

(((

“DO you a feel a bit better now?”

“...Yes. I'm so sorry for all the trouble...”

I blew my nose once again. Somehow, I'd managed to regain my composure.

Aritomo had taken me by the hand along the side of the busy road and into a small café off a side street. The café was managed by an older person. It was quiet with a retro feel.

Aritomo went ahead and placed an order for us, then guided me to a table in the farthest back corner. I was still sniffing.

“So? What the heck happened? You suddenly burst into tears and ran off. You shocked all of us.”

“...Well, I...” I hesitated. Aritomo stifled a laugh.

“Actually, I was more surprised when you slapped Tsukuyomi's hand away. I've never seen you have an outburst like that before.”

I was so embarrassed, I just wanted to crawl in a hole.

I struggled to explain my actions when I myself didn't even understand them. It wasn't an excuse, but I had never raised my hand to another, not in this life nor the last one.

To not only have that happen, but to do it to Lady Chouko...

“I'll never be able to look her in the eye again.”

I slammed my head into the table with a loud thud. I knew it was terribly rude, but I couldn't help it.

"Come on, you don't need to be so worried. Well? What was it that upset you so much anyway?"

"It wasn't...that I was worked up..."

"Well, I mean, you smacked Tsukuyomi's hand, though?"

Ugh. My mind was looping back to that moment again. I warned her that I didn't completely understand it myself.

"Seeing that dress...it hurt somehow."

"Dress? Oh, that expensive-looking wedding dress? What did that gown do to you?!"

Wedding dress! Hearing it said so plainly caused my chest to tighten.

"That dress, uh, well...it..."

Emotions I couldn't put into words were binding my heart. As I struggled in silence, a gentle, deep voice spoke, accompanied a lovely fragrance.

"Here are your two café au laits."

Having the drink placed before me made me realize I hadn't ordered black tea. In my past life, I always drank black tea, so it was what I often made and drank. I had never tried coffee before.

"Well, just have a drink and try to calm down."

"This...is coffee, right? I've never had it before."

"Well, technically it's café au lait. Yeah, I guess I've never seen you drink anything but black tea. So I thought I'd get some for you to try," Aritomo said, lifting her coffee to her lips.

I couldn't very well refuse after that, so I picked up the cup and slowly brought it to my lips.

I prepared myself for the bitterness, but when I drank it, the soft and gentle taste of milk filled my mouth. A unique aroma tickled my nose. I found myself enjoying the aroma.

"...This tastes good."

Not only that, but the subtle sweetness of the milk was soothing.

"Right? You always order the same things, but I think sometimes it's good to try something new."

I thought she'd merely ordered it on a whim, but I was wrong.

Both Aritomo's casual concern and the warmth of the café au lait loosened the knot forming in my chest. I took another sip of my drink and heaved a sigh, allowing the words to form as they came to me.

"When I thought about Chouko wearing that wedding dress and standing next to Mochizuki, I was just overwhelmed with despair," I confessed.

"...Urara?" She said my name, her mouth agape in shock and her body trembling.

"Yes, I know. I don't have any right to say anything about the two of them being together. So I don't know why..."

"No, that's not it! Are you...by any chance..."

"Yes?"

"Do you like...the Prince...Mitsuru?"

"...Come again?"

What exactly was she trying to say?

Her face was a little red as she rattled off many different things, like "Aw, come on" and "Just say it already" and "The best part is, I'm not even interested in him anymore."

No, I knew she had stopped pursuing Mochizuki long ago. That wasn't it.

"I don't like him."

"...But weren't you jealous?"

"Of whom?"

"Of Tsukuyomi!"

"How could I be?!"

"Well, because you smacked her hand away?"

"I don't see Mochizuki as anything more than a friend," I stated.

I did feel a little sorry for how Lady Chouko treated him, but that was all.

Aritomo did a dramatic head tilt. Her neck was almost at sixty degrees. It was quite a sight. Was her neck all right...?

"Hmm?"

"I just couldn't stand to see Chouko in a wedding dress," I clarified. "That was all."

"Mmm-hmmm?"

Her neck tilted even farther, almost to her shoulder, and I really was starting to worry if she was going to end up snapping it.

"U-Um...Aritomo?"

I was getting concerned. I called her name and waved my hand in front of her face.

"Ah, yes. Yes, yes, yes."

"What?"

"I totally get you. She can be pretty cool. I mean, I guess she's kinda pretty and handsome at the same time. And, at least to you, she's sweet and nice. She loves to dote on you. She might feel the same."

She massaged her forehead, as if trying to smooth its wrinkles, and mumbled to herself. "But then, if Urara feels that way, then how does... Oh, but then? Hmmm...hmmm...?!"

I left Aritomo to her thoughts for a moment and drained the remainder of my café au lait. Mm, it was still delicious even after it cooled off. I was still on Team Black Tea, but this experience taught me coffee could be good as well.

At any rate, having vented all my emotions and regained my composure, I began to think of how I could go about apologizing to Lady Chouko.

Should I bake snacks and meet up with her another day, or was it better to go sooner? I lifted my face to ask Aritomo what she thought, and our eyes immediately met.

"Ari..."

"Urara!"

It had been a while since she'd interrupted me like that, but today it felt different somehow.

"You know, I... No matter what, I'll always be your ally."

Yes. I intended to do the same as long as I could...so what brought this on all of a sudden?

"So? A-Are you going to confess?"

Didn't she mean "apologize"? For some reason, her face was red.

"Aw, come on! Why are you so calm? Haven't you figured it out?!"

Why was the person who had calmed me down now asking why I was so calm? Figured what out?

"Um...what exactly should I have figured out?"

"What?!" Aritomo shouted and clambered to her feet so loudly, she surprised even the café owner. But she had no concept of how loud she was and merely continued speaking. "You like her, don't you?! Tsukuyomi?! She's your love interest!"

...Huh? ...What? WHAAAT?!

"L-L-Like... Wha? Me? Chouko? Huh?"

Aritomo nodded vigorously, yet her face held not a hint of jest.

To be fair, I did "like" her, but...

"As a love interest?" I repeated.

"So you don't?"

Having her ask me point-blank like that left me feeling bewildered. I didn't think it was just...admiration I felt. Lady Chouko was incredible, but I didn't admire her in the sense of wanting to become like her. She wasn't my role model.

I was sure that no matter where she went or what she did, Lady Chouko would always be the focus of attention. That wasn't true for me.

That was true for my past life as well. I always felt so awkward amid that sparkling society. Every time my mother mentioned my being a possible candidate for the second prince, my chest began to sting. The reason I dreamed so desperately of becoming a commoner was so that I could live a quiet life.

Which was why I was beginning to think I needed a little space from Lady Chouko.

She was a celestial being. In my past life, I would have avoided her at all costs. But somehow, I always wanted to be with her. Could this be...could it be...

"Is this love?" I asked, more to myself than Aritomo.

I wasn't sure.

It wasn't just the fact that we were both girls, but also the fact that I didn't even understand my own feelings. I was always taught that noblewomen had no need of love. It was how I had been raised.

The gloom in my heart hardened, as if it were bound up by string. And though I should have been calm, I began to feel goose bumps running along my skin.

Seeing me like this, Aritomo abruptly apologized. "I shouldn't have brought it up so suddenly. It seems to really be bothering you."

"No, I'm sorry for not being more forthcoming."

Aritomo seemed mildly embarrassed as she scratched her head. "It's just, well, I've never had much luck with love, in this life or my last."

She apologized again. The world she came from in her past life shared many similarities with this one. Considering I had been born and raised a sheltered noble, she surely was more knowledgeable about love than I was.

After shaking her head, she groaned and spoke in a hushed tone. "You know, I was hospitalized for most of my past life. I hardly ever even got to go to school. I was just stuck in the hospital, playing otome games. You truly are my first friend, and this really is the first time I've been able to talk about romance with anyone."

This was the first time I'd heard anything about Aritomo's past life. Everyone really does have their own challenges and circumstances.

It also helped me understand why she hadn't realized that Shimosuru was falling for her.

And that the otome game world had been everything to Aritomo.

I, too, had things about my past life that I was more hesitant to talk about than telling her I was nobility in another world. And that there was a reason I couldn't fathom love. We both sighed in unison and exchanged a glance.

"It looks like we're both newbs when it comes to love."

"It certainly does."

It felt so strange that the two of us, both with past lives, had been thrust into an otome game world together. I might have my past life memories, but beyond my education, they don't seem to be very useful.

"But I'm having fun," Aritomo said. "Much more than I was before."

"Before? You mean your past life?"

She waved off my question, laughing. "I mean before I met you, Urara."

My heart filled with warmth. My feelings for Aritomo were a little different from those I had for Lady Chouko. Perhaps Aritomo felt the same way about me.

"I feel the same way, Aritomo."

She smiled back at me but also knit her brows together.

"What is it?"

"Hmm... Ah, nothing, it's just..."

"Go on."

She hesitated a bit before finally, seemingly resolving herself, speaking. "Could you please...call me by my first name?"

My heart pounded. She had a point. We were friends after all.

Our first meeting might never have hinted that we would become friends, but now, she was the best friend I had. My one true friend.

"Shizuku. This has been fun."

It surprised me how naturally Aritomo's—no, Shizuku's name welled up from the bottom of my heart and fell from

my lips.

We glanced at each other and burst into giggles.

I ordered another café au lait, and we chatted away the remainder of the day.

Chapter 8: The Lady Bewildered

IT had been a string of nothing but misfortune since I awoke that morning.

My cell phone battery died during the night, so my alarm never went off, I couldn't seem to comb out my bedhead, and I had run out of the tea leaves I intended to have with my breakfast.

Not only that, but even my TV horoscope said today would feature "unforeseen happenings! Be sure to stay home for good luck!" Now, I didn't just buy whatever the horoscopes said, but so many bad things had already happened that it was enough to bring me down.

And then, the pièce de résistance: dance practice was canceled.

"Good morning, Urara. Oboro just informed me that dance practice is canceled today."

"Shizuku, good morning. That's awfully sudden, isn't it?"

"He said cleaners were coming to clean the studio today. He wished he could have given us sooner notice."

Aww. I would have liked to get in there and stretch my body to relieve some stress, so this was a disappointment.

Not only that, but we had five days left until the competition, so we were supposed to begin polishing our performances, but if the studio was getting cleaned, there really was nothing to be done about it.

"I suppose now I'm free today," I said to myself as I hung up the house phone. My sharp-eared sister rushed over to me immediately after.

"Hey, Sis! Did I hear you're free today? Let's go do something fun, then!"

The way she grabbed my hands and gazed up at me pleadingly was so cute. I realized then that I had been so busy with equestrian and dance practice that I had barely spent any time with Kirara.

Shizuku said she had made plans to go out with her family today since they were all off for Obon, so I wanted to spend time with my family as well. That being said, Mother and Father still had to work, so that left only Kirara.

"Good idea. Let's go out," I said, stroking her soft hair. She giggled, then scrambled upstairs to get ready.

While we were waiting at the bus stop, I suddenly remembered my brother.

"What about Haruto? I haven't seen him since this morning."

All the troubles of the morning and getting ready to go out had kept me so busy that I hadn't checked the living room for him. He was usually home, but I hadn't seen him all day.

"Perhaps he went to practice?" I guessed. "But I thought clubs were supposed to be on break, too."

"I dunno. But he left pretty early carrying all his kendo stuff."

When I asked what time he left, Kirara told me it was before we would have gone to school.

Where exactly was he going to practice at that hour? I had a hunch, but the bus arrived before that hunch could fully blossom into an idea, so I shifted my attention. It hadn't been that long since I had been downtown, but still, perhaps because of the holiday, there were many more people this time around.

I was always uncomfortable in crowds. Kirara was the opposite. All the people gave her life, and she was running to and fro, looking at the different shops. Trying to keep up with her was a challenge.

Finally satisfied after looking through several stores, Kirara led me to a charming little café.

“Over here! I saw it in a magazine!”

“...Kirara, this might not be the best idea, though?”

Just beyond its charming exterior were long lines and crowds of people. Apparently, the wait time was over an hour. I was just about to suggest we give up when I heard a familiar voice from behind me.

“Oh, is that you, Urara? What are you in line for?”

“Mr. Agatsuru?”

That voice belonged to the grizzly ma—I mean, Mr. Agatsuru. Actually his beard was gone now, so any resemblance to a bear was gone as well.

“What a pleasant surprise, running into you here. Perhaps it was fate?”

Without his facial hair, Mr. Agatsuru could have been Shimozuru’s brother rather than his cousin.

The mature allure Mr. Agatsuru had, coupled with that air of success about him, attracted a great deal of attention, with just a hint of jealousy.

“I don’t think it was fate. Your boutique is nearby, isn’t it?”

He fixed me with a gaze, then burst into laughter. “That is true. But I also designed this café, so it’s only natural for me to be here as well.”

So this place Kirara so badly wanted to visit was also the work of Mr. Agatsuru. Shimozuru’s family really was something to marvel at.

“Would you like to come in? For you, I’ll gladly have them get you a seat.”

As soon as he said that, I heard Kirara squeal with delight. But we couldn’t possibly accept.

“But there are so many others waiting. We’ll just come another time. Right, Kirara?” I said. Kirara, knowing I wouldn’t budge, nodded, looking despondent.

“You’re just as I’ve heard you were.”

“I apologize for being so rigid.”

"I think it's rather noble of you. Or perhaps I should say, pure-hearted?"

He used a rather exaggerated term to describe my diffidence.

And anyway, I thought *noble* was more appropriate for someone like Lady Chouko. Perhaps that thought shown on my face, because Mr. Agatsuru proceeded to ask me about her.

"By the way, weren't you supposed to meet up with Chouko and the others?"

"Was I?!"

We didn't have any such plans, at least not that I knew of. Come to think of it, I hadn't heard from her since that day at his boutique.

"Oh? I was sure Chouko was going to meet someone named Tendou. Maybe it was my mistake?"

Wh-Which Tendou could that be...?

"Did Chouko really say that? That she was going to meet a Tendou?"

I was shocked at his words, and perhaps my tone was a tad biting, as he took a step back, surprised.

"No, I told Oboro that I had finished making the dress alterations and that I wanted him to bring you both by today. He said he had other business to take care of. When I pushed him to prioritize you girls..."

"He told you Chouko was going to meet with Tendou?" I finished for him.

"Yes, yes. He just ended up asking me if we could have you try on the dresses tomorrow instead. He didn't tell you?"

No one had said anything to me. Not that I minded going to the boutique tomorrow. It was the reasoning behind it that bothered me.

"Plans to see Chouko..."

The pounding in my heart was getting louder. Perhaps Mr. Agatsuru had misheard. But coupled with what he said

about the dress alterations, the Tendou in question had to be me.

And then I remembered. Lady Chouko had met another Tendou. Just once.

“...Haruto!”

“Huh, Haru? Where?”

As soon as I said his name, Kirara began looking around.

“No, Kirara. Not here. You said he left with his kendo gear, right?”

“Yes. He took off with it on his bike like he always does.”

If he left on his bike, there were plenty of places he could have gone, but if he had his gear, that meant one of two destinations. Either his middle school gym, or the kendo dojo where he practiced—

Wait. Based on their conversation the other day, he had attended the same dojo as Shinmyou and Mikazuki. And the same one as Lady Chouko. How could my admittedly small social circle have so easily overlapped with Haruto’s? My heart was pounding faster and faster. I couldn’t simply stand here any longer.

“I’m sorry, Kirara. I just remembered something. I know it’s a little early, but let’s go on home.”

“Aww, but it’s been so long since we got to hang out. Do we have to? There’s so many places I still wanna go.”

I felt terrible, but I couldn’t leave things as they were. I had to hurry up and find out what was going on.

Kirara grumbled and I tried to comfort her, but luckily Mr. Agatsuru stepped in to save the day.

“Urara, you’re the only one who needs to go, right? If so, we could keep an eye on your sister for you.”

“Really?”

I hadn’t noticed that the lady from the other day who had helped me try on clothes was standing next to Mr. Agatsuru.

“I mean, you wouldn’t be leaving if I hadn’t said anything, so it’s the least I can do. I’ll make sure to get her

home.”

“We could have our own fashion show,” the lady from the shop whispered to Kirara.

After seeing so many pictures our mother had taken in her youth in cosplay, Kirara had a soft spot for glamorous clothes. She gave me a pleading look, one that was hard to refuse. I glanced at Mr. Agatsuru.

“Leave it to us.”

I decided to accept. I had always had a good feeling about Mr. Agatsuru.

“I apologize for asking. But is it really all right?”

“I apologize for sticking my nose in your business. Now, come along, young lady.”

“Okay.”

I warned Kirara not to cause any trouble, then took off for the kendo dojo.

I hoped against hope that my fears were unwarranted as I sped off.

(((

FINALLY, I reached the dojo, despite it having been so long since I last visited.

The last time I had come, I remember hearing the din of children practicing. But today, the only commotion I could hear was the sound of crickets.

Thinking I had worried for nothing, I breathed a sigh of relief. However, my reprieve was only momentary, as I recognized a familiar black car on the other side of the road. Wasn't that the same car that belonged to Lady Chouko's family? The one she used to take me to that rose garden? I stared into the driver's seat. The driver noticed me and quickly started the engine.

So Lady Chouko was here. Likely with Haruto.

I rushed over to the building. I grabbed the lattice beneath an open window and pulled myself up, peering in to see who was there. As I did, I could see two people in kendo armor facing off against each other, their bamboo swords at the ready.

I could tell one of them was Haruto right away. His armor was familiar, right down to the name “Tendou” embroidered on the strip that hung down from it.

Then there was his opponent. His opponent’s uniform was bright white, a strong contrast to Haruto’s, which was dyed indigo. They were both in position, their swords in alignment.

I couldn’t see beneath the mask, but that slender form had to be—

“Chouko!”

I shouted without meaning to, but my voice echoed in time with Mikazuki’s “Begin!”

Both combatants eased into a standing position, their eyes locked on one another as they tried to read the other’s movements.

As I watched, questions flooded my mind. Why were they doing this?



Haruto Tendou's Conditions

“LET me see him.”

After I was certain my sister and her friend had left, I pressed Sakutarou. His face soured.

“Do it,” I insisted.

He sighed and looked at me with that usual cool demeanor.

“You might try actually asking instead of demanding.”

His voice sounded calm, but I could tell he was getting annoyed. Right. He had always been such a pain, hanging all over Kogetsu like a lost puppy. But he always tried to act tough and easily got irritated.

But I wasn't a kid anymore.

“I'm not asking. I'm demanding.”

“Excuse me?!”

My forceful words clearly angered him.

“You don't want it getting around that he goes to school like that, do you? You want me to be quiet? Let me see him.”

It was less a demand and more a threat. I knew it, but I couldn't back down now.

We stared each other down, wondering what the other would do next, when a voice called out to us.

“Saku, calm down. Both of you need to. You're not going to get anywhere arguing like that.”

He looked like an idol. Like the type Kirara loved watching on TV.

The way he spoke to me without a hint of suspicion despite my barging in must have meant I was getting somewhere. So I decided it would be faster to reason with him than Sakutarou.

“And you are?” I asked.

“Oboro Shimozuru. I'm friends with Saku and Ui...and Kogetsu.”

“Oboro!” Sakutarou shouted, the veins in his temple bulging, but this Shimozuru guy kept going, undeterred.

“It’s better to sort these things out now. He knew Kogetsu, after all.” He turned to me. “But why do you want to see him?” he asked, adding, “It can’t be just to rekindle an old friendship, can it?”

This Shimozuru was something. He was smiling, but his eyes were stone cold.

Everyone Kogetsu hung around was a pain to deal with. They annoyed me, but I also couldn’t help but laugh.

If I had run into him now, without any of this mess with my sister, it might have been the same for me. I might have ended up in his orbit of friends, too.

But that was out of the question now.

“I’ll talk to him one-on-one. Give him my cell number.”

I handed the number I had written down earlier to Shimozuru.

“And what if I throw it away?” he asked, waving the paper about.

“Do it and you’ll never see my sister again,” I said, glaring at him.

I had no idea if I could really enforce that, but I must have been convincing enough.

“Crap,” he mumbled, then raised his voice to normal volume. “I’ll give it to him.”

This time, the smile on his face was genuine.

Later that night, as I was getting ready for bed, I got a call. When I answered the unfamiliar number, a voice from my past spoke.

“Yo! You get any stronger since we last met?”

“That’s how you start a phone call? I bet I’m stronger than you, at least.”

“I think you’re confusing getting stronger with getting arrogant, Haruto. You’re still such a kid,” he said, his laugh

more natural than it had been in the past. "So, what's up? I'm not lending you any money."

No one wants your money, dude. And I wasn't letting him have anything of mine, either.

"I'm not lending you my sister, either."

He seemed caught off guard by my words. But then he quickly pulled himself together and retorted, "I don't want you to 'lend me' your sister. I want Urara all for my very own."

"What?! Hey!" I shouted, shocked that he would come out and say that. I listened intently to make sure no one else in my house had heard and was yelling my name. When no one did, I breathed a sigh of relief. I lowered my voice.

"What's this stupid crap you're goin' on about? And you really are an idiot. Don't screw with me. And why are you running around dressed like a girl anyway?"

"I don't have much of a choice. There are reasons."

"Don't have a choice? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you think if I could easily explain my situation, I'd be dressed like that, idiot?"

Even though I was trying to keep my voice down, I was getting so mad, my breath was growing ragged.

All I could figure out so far was that he wasn't doing it because he wanted to, but what reason could there be?

How was he getting away with deceiving everyone at his school? I'd heard from my sister that he came from a rich family, so wasn't he being a little reckless? I would think that family of his would be concerned about him attending school as a girl. There was no way in hell I was letting a sketchy guy like that have my precious sister!

"Anyway, stay away from my sister."

"Pass."

I wanted to shout back, "Don't 'pass' me!" but I stopped myself.

"Stay away from her or I'll spill your secret!"

I wasn't sure if I really meant it, but I had to at least come off strong. I listened for a reaction but only heard him click his tongue.

I was the one who should have been making that noise.

You're the last person I wanna hear saying I'm getting arrogant, Kogetsu. I hung my head and heaved a sigh.

"I won't give up on her."

What is this guy's problem?! Urrgh!

I was so mad, I could barely think straight.

I couldn't threaten him. But I couldn't back down, either. As I racked my brain thinking of ways to keep Kogetsu from my sister, I could only come up with one.

What was my sister up to lately? A dance contest? Why? I thought I'd heard her say it was some kind of competition.

Then...

"Let's have a match, Kogetsu."

"Huh? Where did that come from?"

I had wanted to avoid this if possible. I didn't like feeling as if I were using my sister as some sort of prize. But it was too late to back out now.

"If I win, you can keep your secret, but you can never come near my sister again."

I had tried so hard to intimidate him, but it hadn't worked. I expected him to laugh it off.

But he didn't.

"All right. Kendo, right? Winner takes all."

He accepted, just like that? Did he not realize I was in the national tournament last year? Was he thinking he could beat me because he was stronger than me for a time in elementary school? I was more annoyed that he thought it would be an easy win.

"I heard you made it to the top three in nationals last year," he said, sounding amused. "Make sure you win it this year."

I was actually happy he had known. But his next words rekindled my anger.

"I'm going to do you a favor and knock all the crap out of you before then. You should thank me."

"Shut up! I'll be the one knocking you around!"

He laughed and told me he'd call again, then hung up before I could say anything else. He was the cocky one here.

I let out a muffled shout and tossed my phone onto my bed.

Two days later, he informed me that our match would be held at the dojo where we used to practice.

The old man who taught there would never allow us to use it for a personal grudge match. Kogetsu said he'd told him we needed it for practice. The owner was an old friend of Kogetsu's family, so it was easy to convince him.

I felt guilty for lying to the old man, but we only needed it this once, so I apologized to him inside my head.

And so, while everyone else was making plans for Obon, I was preparing for my match. Finally, the day arrived.

"...Is it just me, or does Kogetsu look upset?" I asked.

"Yeah. Leave him alone. He got in trouble with Urara again."

I had arrived earlier than planned so I could clean the dojo as a sort of apology to the old man.

Kogetsu arrived at the appointed time, but gone was his calm-and-collected attitude from our phone call.

When I asked Ui, who had come along to referee, he merely chuckled and gave that as an answer.

It had been so long since I last saw Ui. His affable nature was the same as always.

"Again?!" I shouted. "What did he do this time?"

"Shut up!" Kogetsu butt in. "I didn't make her mad!"

Clad in a white *gi* with his hair pulled back into a ponytail, Kogetsu might have had a nice face, but the way he was thundering about the dojo, it was hard to see him as anything other than male.

But when I saw him that day in his school uniform and all, I really thought he was a girl. That maybe Kogetsu had a

sister.

When he saw the accusatory look on my face, he suddenly started mumbling excuses.

"I just offered her a handkerchief when she started crying for no reason. I have no idea what I did wrong."

"Didn't she slap you? You definitely did something wrong," Ui said.

I stared at Kogetsu and got a heavy sigh in return.

If she could make Kogetsu this upset, my sister really was a force to be reckoned with. At least where he was concerned.

"Enough with the chatter. Let's get this over with," Sakutarou intoned. He never was good at reading the room.

The three of them came together. Ui I expected. I hadn't guessed that Sakutarou would come along, let alone that he would be so pushy.

"Right. Let's get on with it. You already know I'm gonna win, though, right?" Kogetsu said, waving us forward. Sakutarou then explained his conditions.

"Our terms are the same. For your silence."

I had no intention of losing, so it was easy for me to say okay to that. I had improved significantly. I touched my mask to signal I was ready.

"Begin!"

The instant we heard Ui shout, we rose, our bamboo swords aligned, and moved apart.

I figured he would come at me and make the first move, but he defied my expectations. He pushed past my sword and went for my wrist.

Maybe he didn't hit the right spot, as neither our referee, Ui, nor his assistant, Sakutarou, said anything. Normally, we wouldn't need two judges, but today we were playing under special rules.

"Haruto. Keep your mind on the match," Kogetsu muttered. He used to always warn me about the same thing.

I went at him again in a rush. The sound of our bamboo blades clashing resounded throughout the dojo.

I thrust forward, my sword within range of Kogetsu's head.

"You have gotten stronger, Haruto."

"Or have you just gotten weaker, Kogetsu?"

I was trying to put everything I had into coming off tough, even glaring at him through my mask even though he could not see me, but despite that, he heaved a sigh of relief and chuckled.

"You haven't changed. You need to train harder."

He knocked my sword aside and lifted his own from targeting my torso to targeting my head.

I laughed. He was the same old Kogetsu, trying so hard to sound cool. Fine, if he wanted to play badass, I would show him just how badass I could be.

The instant both of us stepped forward, I realized I was a second too slow. He was coming for my head. In a panic, I thrust my sword forward as hard as I could.

"That's the match," Ui announced. I only then realized I had lost. Had he hit my head? I looked to Ui for an explanation.

"You won," he said with a laugh.

"Huh?"

I turned back to see Kogetsu in his white *gi* doubled over on the floor.

He was wheezing and groaning in pain, massaging his throat. I realized then that I had gotten him.

"I was the one who lost," I said. "Hitting the throat is against the rules."

In middle school kendo it was, at least. I knew that, but I had been so bent on not losing to Kogetsu.

"Sorry," I said, offering him my hand, but he smacked it away.

"Ha! I don't care about your middle school kendo," he said and began removing his armor on the spot. He opened

his *gi*, exposing his torso and neck. I could see the base of his throat was red. It looked painful. That was gonna leave a mark.

“Ah, I guess I lost. Who ever thought I would lose to Haruto.”

“Stop mocking me. I competed in nationals.”

“Is that so?” He laughed and sat cross-legged. That look on his face was so nostalgic. It was like we really had gone back to those days.

I hadn’t meant to talk his ear off about my sister back then...

At that moment...

“Chouko! Haruto!”

I heard my sister’s voice echoing throughout the dojo. What was she doing here?

(((

I had gone to watch Haruto’s kendo matches numerous times, but never had I felt so nervous as I had this time.

After all, he was going up against Lady Chouko, and the way his sword moved belied his nervousness.

My fists tightened, watching the two of them while clutching the lattice.

You can do this!

Those words suddenly appeared in my mind.

Who had I intended those words for? As soon as I tried to answer my own question, I heard a crash.

When I looked up, it seemed the match had been decided, though I personally couldn’t tell who had won.

However, I could see quite clearly that Lady Chouko was doubled over on the floor.

“Chouko!”

I panicked and charged toward the entrance, where I found Shinmyou standing guard in front of the door with a

bitter grin on his face. He was fast. He had been refereeing inside just a moment ago. Perhaps he had realized I was watching from outside.

But I didn't care. I needed to get to Lady Chouko. I took my shoes off in the entrance as he called out to me.

"I wouldn't go in there right now if I were you."

"And why not? Chouko might be hurt, you know?"

"It's nothing serious. Go home before they see you."

They had both been wearing armor during the match, but the way she hit the ground wasn't "nothing serious." I couldn't go home without at least making sure she wasn't hurt.

"I will not. I can't just go home if there's a chance my brother or Chouko was hurt."

As soon as I said this, I spotted a bathroom off the entrance hall. I pulled out my handkerchief and ran it under some warm water.

"So you want to go in, no matter what?"

"Of course."

I had no idea what he was going on about. I just wanted him to move, so my words had become terser.

I suppose he realized I wasn't going to change my mind, so he gave a little sigh and took a step away from the door.

"I personally don't want you getting further involved with us. I hope you'll remember that."

I ignored his seemingly ominous words and opened the door to the dojo, calling out to the two of them.

"Chouko! Haruto!"

Their eyes widened in surprise at my appearance.

Haruto had only just removed his helmet, but Lady Chouko had stripped all her armor off and was sitting in just her *gi*.

"...Sis, why are you here?"

"Don't 'why' me! That's what I would like to know."

My first question was why he and Lady Chouko were having a kendo match in the first place.

But more importantly, ensuring Lady Chouko hadn't been hurt took precedence. I approached her and gazed down, noticing her *gi* had been undone and was open, exposing her chest and a glaring red mark at the base of her throat.

Oh no, she really had been injured, hadn't she?

Worried, I sat down in front of her and pressed the damp cloth to the red spot on her neck.

"Ow..."

"Does it hurt? Or is it just the cold? Please try and bear it. You need to cool it before it swells."

"U-Urara? Um...", Lady Chouko said timidly, in a voice more hoarse than usual.

"Yes?" I replied, then peered into her face and noticed she was avoiding my eyes and acting strange.

It was odd. Even odder when a timid voice called out from behind me.

"U-Um, Sis...?"

"What is it, Haruto?"

"Well, it's just, today, we're...uh..."

His vague words trailed off. I was getting frustrated trying to figure out what he wanted. But I realized getting angry would solve nothing and resolved myself to restrain my temper.

"Haruto..."

"Yes?"

"You know I'm angry with you, don't you?"

"Ah, well...yeah."

I wanted to lay into him about starting trouble and holding this match and injuring Lady Chouko, but what I was most upset about was—

"Why didn't you tell me you knew Chouko?"

"Huh?"

"I introduced her to you as my friend. Why didn't you tell me?"

"Um...I'm sorry. But..."

He was likely apologizing out of shock over seeing me angry in public like this. I rarely ever showed my ire in front of others.

His attitude only stoked the flames further, and I snapped at him. "Don't 'I'm sorry' me! How could you...how could you hurt a girl like this? What were you thinking?!"

Everyone in the room froze. It was as if the air itself had iced over.

And then I realized something was off.

I had noticed it when I pressed the damp cloth to the spot just below Lady Chouko's neck. She had been hiding many things from me, but had there been a bulge there before?

And then I noticed that, beneath her open *gi*, there weren't even the tiniest of lumps.

"Ch-Chouko...? Sh-Shouldn't you be wearing a T-shirt under your *gi*...?"

I was still facing Haruto, even though I was speaking to Lady Chouko, and I could feel something move at the base of her throat where I was still holding the damp cloth.

"Sis, um, well...you see..."

Haruto's voice echoed in my ears as if from a distance.

My neck moved in a clunky fashion, like an old toy, as I turned to look at Lady Chouko.

"Urara."

"Chouko...?"

That was the face of the Lady Chouko I knew, and yet it seemed to be twisted in much pain.

No, please don't make that face, I wanted to tell her, but the words would not come.

The few thoughts that rose in my mind swelled and contorted, finally spilling over my lips.

"...A boy?"

The person before me definitely had an Adam's apple, small as it might have been. Not to mention the fact that their chest was definitely not that of a girl's.

Why? How? How could Lady Chouko be a boy? She was so beautiful, so gentle, the picture of a lady. This had to be a misunderstanding. She wouldn't deceive me, would she? After all, not one person at school would believe for a second she was a boy. ...Of course not. Was I wrong? Then, what about the others? I looked around at them.

Mikazuki looked as if he were ready to curse. Haruto just seemed worried about me. And Shinmyou had tried to stop me from coming in. I finally understood why he had said what he said.

That was the first time I truly understood that Chouko really was a boy.

"Urara...I'm sorry."

The second Chouko reached for my hair, I instinctively knocked his hand away.

"...No!"

Having the truth thrust upon me like this, I was so flustered, I could only utter that one word before fleeing the dojo.

I could hear them calling my name and someone shouting behind me, but I ignored them, focused only on running away.

By the time I returned to my senses, I was standing in front of my house. I couldn't even remember walking there.

I was surprised to see I had arrived just at the same time as Kirara and the lady from Mr. Agatsuru's boutique.

The sun hadn't even set yet, even though it felt as if so much time had passed since I left the dojo.

Without lifting my head, I managed to eke out a thank you.

"Thank you very much for today."

"It was our pleasure. We had a lot of fun, right, Kirara?"

They both smiled at each other. Normally the sight would make me happy, but today, I couldn't bring myself to feel anything.

"We'll see you at the store tomorrow," the lady said in parting, and it took everything I had to give her a fake smile in return.

"Urara?" Kirara looked worried.

"I'm sorry, Kirara. My head really hurts. Could you please let me be?" I responded and headed for my room.

I cocooned myself within my futon, asking myself over and over: Why? How?

I remained in my room without dinner. My family was worried, but I insisted I just had a headache.

"Um...Sis? I wasn't keeping it from you," Haruto said at my door, but I didn't want to hear anymore. I pulled the quilt tighter around me and let my consciousness slip away.

(((

"COME on, Urara, let's go."

It was morning. Clutching my hollow head, I lugged my heavy body down to the living room, where I found Shizuku sitting in the middle seat at the table for some reason.

"Hello...?"

"Hurry up and get ready. You look awful today."

Yes, I was well aware. Why was she here?

"Thank you," Shizuku said, accepting a cup of tea from Kirara. She then looked back at me.

"I tried calling you over and over last night. So I thought it would be better just to come by myself. Hehe," she giggled, seemingly proud of herself for surprising me. Kirara nodded approvingly as she spoke.

They both seemed to be enjoying this.

"Anyway, hurry up! Get ready! We don't wanna be late for our appointment!"

"What...appointment?"

"For our dresses! Our alterations are done. Come on, let's go!"

“Ehehe. She said I can go, too!” Kirara announced.

They both grabbed me from either side, giggling.

B-But how could I face the others after what happened yesterday?! I couldn't tell Shizuku Chouko's secret, but I wasn't ready to just sit quietly with it, either.

I was steeped in anxiety.

“Aww...Tendou, are you all right?”

“...Uh, yes. More or less.”

Less was more like it.

I had somehow managed to keep up appearances, but my eyes were puffy, and with no way to hide it, I merely looked away while responding.

It was only natural that Shimozuru, who was coming with us, would have heard what happened. He was acting awkward around me. I could feel his probing gaze on me every now and then, but I just pretended not to notice as we walked to the boutique.

However, as we were led back into the same salon as the other day and laid eyes on the dresses, their brilliant appearance managed to chase the clouds in my heart away.

“It's gorgeous...,” Shizuku, Kirara, and I all said in unison, unable to take our eyes off the dresses.

New ribbons had been attached at the chest and cuffs, but somehow, they weren't overly gaudy. The lace adorning the front had been embroidered with dainty roses.

The base was still the same dress I had tried on the other day, but the customizations were less alterations and more turning the dress into something brand-new. Glancing at Shizuku's dress, I saw hers was now cuter and more glamorous than before.

“Well? Do you like them?” Mr. Agatsuru asked with a smile, having shown up at some point while we were entranced by the dresses.

“Wow! Yes, of course!” Shizuku repeated over and over, still mesmerized by hers.

“How about you, Urara? Anything I need to fix?”

“No, it is wonderful. But was it really all right for you to go to so much trouble?”

It was normal for people to wear dresses each day in my past life, but I had a feeling we would be wearing these for only a few hours. No matter how great the technology, going to all this trouble in such a short amount of time must have been difficult.

As soon as I asked him that, his smile widened.

“Oh, no, I had great inspiration. Our designers and pattern maker all worked together on these.”

“But...”

“We would have liked to make you a dress from scratch but didn’t have the time. Next time, we’ll really make you something special. So don’t worry,” he said.

“What are you saying?! Commoners like myself don’t get beautiful gowns like this. We have nowhere to wear them.” Flustered, I turned the kind offer down.

He raised his eyebrows, confused. I couldn’t figure out why. All of a sudden, he leaned over and whispered in my ear. “I’m sorry about yesterday. I shouldn’t have opened my mouth.”

I leaped up in surprise.

I knew what he was trying to say.

He was Shimozuru’s cousin. And considering he had his own fashion brand, he likely prepared all of Chouko’s clothes.

I couldn’t feign ignorance.

Even so, I wasn’t ready to answer him. If I did, I was so afraid it meant I would have to discard everything I knew about Chouko until now—

I struggled to gather my thoughts. Finally opening my eyes, I addressed Mr. Agatsuru.

“Ah—”

“Ahh!”

“Huh?”

"I-It's the grizzly guy!"

Shizuku, you're actually a lifesaver for once. She was clearly referring to his now-absent beard. Apparently she hadn't noticed it was Mr. Agatsuru until now.

After we tried on the altered dresses and did a final check, we made our way to the café from yesterday, having made a proper reservation this time.

Shizuku had also heard of the café, so she and Kirara chatted happily about the different items on the menu.

"But I really was spooked. How could a grizzly bear look so different without the beard?"

I still couldn't believe she called him a grizzly bear to his face.

"Don't I look sexy now? Makes me look more like Oboro, doesn't it?" That was an adult for you—Mr. Agatsuru took Shizuku's verbal abuse in stride. He punctuated his remarks with an idol-like smile and a wink.

"We so do not look alike! Go to hell Kiyoharu!" Shimozuru said, cursing for perhaps the first time since I'd met him.

Kirara, squealing, watched Mr. Agatsuru making the idol pose.

Shizuku narrowed her eyes as if scrutinizing him. "In your dreams," she muttered.

"The pose aside, your faces do look alike," I said, causing both Shimozuru and Shizuku to give me sour looks.

Their faces were kind of funny and somehow caused me to burst into effortless laughter.

"Oh, you finally laughed."

"I did...?"

"Urara, you hadn't noticed? You've had a frown on your face all day. Right?" Shizuku said, pressing Shimozuru for agreement.

"That's right," he replied, a bit timidly.

Had I really been making such an unsightly face?

Flustered, I apologized over and over to Mr. Agatsuru. He merely nodded.

"I understand why. But you do like the dress, don't you?"

"Yes. Of course I do."

When I had stood in front of the mirror, I had admired the dress. Even in my past life I would have not had the chance to wear something so stunning.

It was so beautiful, it felt a waste letting someone like me wear it. How wonderful it would be to dance in a dress like that.

Up until the day before yesterday, I would have been so excited, I could hardly stand it.

But for some reason, I just couldn't see myself dancing. My partner's face, the sequence of the steps, they were fading. Was I really worthy of that dress feeling this way?

I once again glanced at Mr. Agatsuru and noticed he was giving me a serene smile.

"It's fine," he chided gently. "You need to be more confident so you can properly show off my work. I know it will all work out."

I know it will all work out.

For some reason, those words seeped into my heart.

He was right. And anyway, I needed to focus on the dance competition.

My mind was too tired to sift through everything regarding Chouko.

After all, I had hidden everything about my past life, including how I knew how to dance and ride a horse in spite of having no experience. I realized I had been putting Chouko on a pedestal, and now here I was, blaming him and demanding explanations when I had been unwilling to share my own.

Once this round was over, I wanted to talk it out. Even if Chouko didn't believe me, at least there would be no lies between us.

So please, Chouko, tell me about yourself. I want to know all about you, too.

(((

THE next day at the dance studio, I suggested to everyone that we let go of the distractions of the past few days and focus on dancing. We only had two days left to practice.

Naturally, Shimosuru looked as if he had something to say, and Shinmyou furrowed his brow, but they both remained silent and accepted my proposal.

Dancing in time with the music helped ease some of my gloom. Slowly, as we danced our way through the set, a smile emerged on my face.

Seeing me cheer up, Shimosuru and Shizuku, too, returned to their normal cheer.

“Hey! Oboro! You’re going way too fast!”

“Come on, you can do it, too! See!”

They leaped and then turned. Their dancing lacked elegance, but watching how much fun they seemed to be having brought another smile to my face.

“Hehehe. They look like they’re having fun,” I said to Shinmyou before realizing it. He was a little surprised, too, and his body gave a tiny tremble.

“Are you...um, are you really all right with things as they are?”

I had an idea of what he meant, but I pretended not to.

“No, I’m not.”

“Seriously?!”

“Well, we should be having more fun. Like Shizuku and Shimosuru.”

For a brief second, he made a silly face.

I gave him a smile in return. This was our last challenge, after all, so we might as well enjoy ourselves.

“R-Right...”

He was a bit hesitant, but little by little, he seemed to slowly warm to me.

There were three days left until the contest.

I was afraid of what was to come, but I resolved to keep my emotions and heart from sinking into despair.

Chapter 9: The Lady Dances

I was certain we would hold the contest in the dance studio we had been using, but apparently I was mistaken.

“Hey, where are you taking us?”

Clearly, Shizuku had been under the same impression, as she had asked the same question no less than three times since the car that had been sent for us arrived, without once receiving a satisfactory answer.

“Well, Mitsuru was the one who chose the place,” Shimosuru replied. “Just hold on a little longer.”

“Come on, if you know where we’re going, just say so.”

Shimosuru merely smiled wearily. He had none of his usual cheer. Shinmyou also hadn’t said a word all morning.

“First of all, we can’t even see outside with these,” Shizuku said, rapping on the thick curtains covering the windows. The car Mochizuki had sent for us was a long black limousine. It was the first time I’d ever ridden in such a glamorous car, and I could hardly contain my excitement.

Everyone else seemed so used to it, which made me realize how different the world they inhabited was from my own.

Shimosuru trying to calm Shizuku served as the background music as our car rolled along.

After about an hour and a half, the car finally stopped.

“Looks like we’re here,” Shimosuru said just as the door was opened softly from the outside. I expected the August heat to fill the car but was pleasantly surprised when it didn’t. I stepped out and realized we were atop a verdant hill.

Right in front of us stood a building with a classic design that reminded me of a grand hotel.

“Whoa... Is this...?”

“Do you know this place, Shizuku?”

“Yeah. There was a CG that featured a place like this in the game... I think it’s one of the Prince’s family’s properties,” she whispered in my ear. My eyes were fixed on the building.

As I remained entranced, a middle-aged man in a dark-gray suit arrived to escort us.

“Welcome, Master Shinmyou, Master Shimosuru. It would be my pleasure to show you and your lady guests inside.”

“Please do.”

“Thank you, Mr. Yamanashi.”

We had never seen him before, but the other two seemed to know him well. We greeted him and followed along.

“Thank you for having us today,” I said with a curtsy. Something flashed in Mr. Yamanashi’s eyes. I tilted my head, a bit intrigued, but his expression quickly returned to its stoic state.

“This way, please,” he said.

We were led over a well-polished floor that was bordered on either side by doors that seemed to lead to anterooms.

“Ladies, you will be here in the White Rose Room. We have your dresses, as well as hair, makeup, and wardrobe stylists, awaiting you. Masters Shinmyou and Shimosuru, we have prepared the Royal Lotus Room for both of you, so please follow me.”

“White Rose Room?”

“That is where I was instructed to take them,” Mr. Yamanashi said.

With such polite words, Shinmyou’s question was essentially evaded. The door to the White Rose Room was opened for us, and we were ushered inside.

“Everything in here seems insanely expensive,” Shizuku whispered to me.

"It does. Everything from the entrance hall looked expensive enough, but this is a whole other level."

"I'm so freaked out, I'm afraid to move."

Even Shizuku appeared to be out of her element.

With the aide of the hair, makeup, and wardrobe stylists, we were able to clean up well, so it seemed a waste for us to be wearing such long faces.

All our helpers departed, leaving us alone, so I sat down in the chair in front of Shizuku to chat and lighten the mood.

"You look lovely today. I'm sure Shimosuru will appreciate it."

"Hwh...whaa!? ...I mean, appreciate what?!" Shizuku sputtered. But it was true.

Rather than her trademark pigtails, her side bangs were braided and her hair in the back was left down. It was refreshing and cute.

"Let's enjoy ourselves today," I said to cheer her up.

"Yeah," she said, taking a deep breath. "Urara, you seem so comfortable in this place. I suppose it must be because you used to be nobility."

"Could be..."

I thought back on those days. When I was about to make my societal debut, I was just as tense as Shizuku was now. However, back then, there was someone who tried to make me laugh and calm my nerves.

Back then, I really...

"Hehehe."

"Hmm?"

"Ah, I'm sorry. It's just, I was remembering that when I was a debutante, I was even more nervous."

"I see. Well then, let me correct you on one thing," she said, standing up. "Don't say 'You look lovely today.' It's supposed to be 'You're as lovely as ever today.'"

"You're right. I'm sorry," I apologized. Our eyes met and we both burst into laughter.

With our nerves finally calmed, we were finally relaxing when a knock came at the door.

"Come in."

"Pardon me," the man from earlier, Mr. Yamanashi, said as he opened the door, then entered with Shinmyou and Shimozuru in tow.

Both of the boys had their hair smoothed and styled and were in full evening dress. Their eyes fixated on us in shock.

"Wow...those dresses look great! You're both so cute, really beautiful!"

Shizuku didn't react to Shimozuru's enthusiastic praise the way I would have expected her to.

"Thanks. Oboro, you look really cool, too, you know?"

Her tone was as arrogant as ever, but still, Shimozuru seemed happy, so I suppose it didn't matter.

He offered her his arm and she accepted. Our transformation was now complete.

"You are also very..."

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" I asked Shinmyou when I didn't catch what he mumbled.

"Nothing. Let's go."

My partner, Shinmyou, offered me his arm as well. As I accepted, I squeezed my eyes shut.

"I'm counting on you," I said with a deep breath, and we made our way to the place where the competition would be held.

On the other side of a stately door, we found a massive hall. Countless large, grand chandeliers hung from the ceiling. They were unlit, as it wasn't quite noon yet. Instead, the sunlight from the windows reflected off the chandeliers, causing them to glisten.

While this place wasn't as grand as the royal palace of Lacrofine, it was a reception hall fit for the richest of nobles.

While I was admiring the skillful construction of the room, the door at the head of the room opened smoothly

and without a sound. In stepped Mochizuki, Izayoi, and Mikazuki.

“Mochizuki...what’s with the getup?”

“Oh no, I can’t even, I can’t even... Oh no, he’s too precious. My nose is gonna start bleeding!”

Mochizuki stood before us, his hair slicked back and in impeccable full evening dress. Izayoi and Mikazuki trailed behind him.

Shinmyou and Shimosuru also seemed to be taken aback and unable to find words. Fortunately, Shizuku had enough to say for everyone. Well, I couldn’t blame her. After all, Mochizuki was her favorite character in the otome game.

As it was just before noon, perhaps a morning coat would have been more appropriate, but he was wearing a tailcoat and evening dress, just like the other four boys.

No wonder Shizuku called him “the Prince.” The other four looked phenomenal as well, but clearly Mochizuki was the next level of refinement. Even the cuffs he wore suited him nicely.

Mochizuki gave us a glance and made his way in gallant strides over to us. He stopped before Shizuku and extended his hand.



“Well, shall we get started?”

“Um...?”

“Wait a second, Mitsuru! You’re the judge, right? Why would you be dancing, too?” Shimosuru objected, stepping forward as the rest of us froze in place.

“If I’m judging, then it would be faster just to assess them myself,” Mochizuki said airily.

“So all three of them are going to be your partner, Mitsuru?” Shinmyou asked.

“I’ve just decided. We’ll be dancing three songs, one right after the other,” he readily responded.

If Mochizuki was really as good as he seemed to believe he was, then maybe this was the best way.

The six of us exchanged glances.

Ever since we chose to hold a dance contest, Shinmyou had been practicing as my dance partner, and Shimosuru had been Shizuku’s. So it was only natural that we expected to have them as our partners for the actual challenge as well.

“But they’ve only ever practiced with us,” Shimosuru protested. “It’s not right.”

“It’s not as if this is an official event. If they can’t at least dance with a different partner, then they’re probably not any good anyway. Right?”

Shimosuru clearly couldn’t disagree with that fair argument, so he bit his lip in disappointment. Shinmyou would never have opposed Mochizuki in the first place, so he merely stood there with a grumpy look on his face. The other two boys were just here to watch, so they had no say in the matter either.

Still, what about Chouko?

I had been so taken aback by Mochizuki’s outfit that I hadn’t noticed right away, but Chouko still wasn’t there.

I turned to ask Mochizuki about him, but he turned away. He then went on to impress our two choices upon us.

"So, are you going to dance, or will you pass? Which is it?"

Shizuku, who had gone quiet after her initial outburst, stepped forward, a look of resolve in her eyes.

"I would never think of passing up this challenge. I'm counting on you as a partner," she said, offering him a curtsy not unlike the one I had performed when telling her the truth of my past life.

"Very well. I look forward to dancing with you."

He seemed pleased with the lovely curtsy Shizuku had given him and once again offered her his hand. Holding hands, he escorted her out onto the floor in a grand manner.

The music gave them both just enough time to get into position before beginning to play, and so they began to move, dancing naturally in time.

Shizuku's dress billowed softly as she moved to the gentle rhythm.

"Shizuku certainly looks lovely." The words fell from my lips instinctively.

"I hate to admit it, but yeah, Mitsuru really is a good dancer. He's doing a great job leading her," Shimozuru grumbled.

"Naturally," Shinmyou coolly interjected. "He has a great deal more experience."

I pretended not to hear that very audible gnashing of teeth. No matter what I could have said to Shimozuru, it wouldn't have made a difference.

The sound of Shizuku's steps ended in time with the music. Mochizuki escorted Shizuku back to us, her cheeks slightly flushed. It was rather adorable.

She let go of his hands as soon as she was back and dashed over to me. She gave me a great big hug.

Y-You're going to wrinkle our dresses, Shizuku.

"W-Well, how was it? I think that was my best dance yet!"

"Yes. It was very elegant. You've improved a great deal."

“Oboro, did you see? What did you think?!” she asked with an innocent smile.

“Yeah, you danced beautifully,” he said, a subtle grin on his lips.

“With a performance like that, you’ll absolutely pass. You could dance anywhere without issue.”

Shizuku looked triumphant on hearing Mochizuki’s words. Pass? Something about that gave me a bad feeling.

“So, next is Urara’s turn, right?” Shizuku said. “Oh, wait, where’s Tsukuyomi? She’s still not here?”

Having just now realized Chouko wasn’t there, Shizuku looked all around, but still Chouko did not appear.

Again, I looked to Mochizuki, hoping he’d actually pay attention this time.

As soon as I did, he said something I could scarcely believe.

“Chouko Tsukuyomi will not be taking part in this contest. As a result, the two of you have won,” he announced indifferently.

“Wait a second! What exactly does that mean?!”

“Exactly what I said. She decided not to dance. That’s all.”

“That’s unacceptable,” I persisted. “After all...”

“It was her decision. I couldn’t get her to change her mind,” he responded coldly.

“Urara, I know you’re disappointed, but please calm down.”

“Tendou, Mitsuru can’t really do anything about it...”

Shizuku and Shimozuru were trying to soothe me.

I understood what they were trying to say, I did. But that didn’t mean I could easily accept it.

After all, Chouko had agreed to the challenge. He said it would be all right. So I couldn’t understand why he would back out now.

“You got what you wanted, Saku. Or was it the other way around?”

"No, I... No, you're right. It doesn't matter to me either way. Whatever Chouko wants to do is fine by me."

Even as I listened to Mochizuki and Shinmyou's back-and-forth, I still couldn't accept it.

After all, he had yet to even see my dress. The one Mr. Agatsuru asked me to show off for him.

And then there was Chouko's request to dance with me. I hadn't had a chance to practice the male part...and now I didn't need to...

"Is it because of what I found out?"

The words had slipped from my lips before I could stop them.

I had been trying to close my eyes and cover my ears, to feign ignorance to what I had learned.

"Huh? What do you mean?" Shizuku asked in shock, but I ignored her and continued on.

"Did Chouko quit because I found out he's really a boy?"

"No, that's not what happened!" Shimozuru rushed toward me, trying to comfort me and convince me otherwise, but thankfully, Shizuku held him back.

Her jaw had dropped at the secret I had exposed, but she remained my silent ally.

My feelings bubbled over, and there was nothing I could do to stop them.

"That's it, isn't it? After all, I...I ran away. Without giving him a second to hear what he had to say."

Yes. I ran away.

I ignored Chouko even after he called out to me.

I should have turned back to face him. I continued to blame myself over and over.

I was always doing things like this.

Always, always, always, always.

I was in the wrong, always so steeped in my own emotions without trying to understand someone else's.

"It's all my fault..."

"This has nothing to do with what happened that day," Shinmyou said. "This was his choice. It's not your fault, Tendou."

"Th-That's right. So don't worry so much."

As I began to cool down, Shimozuru once again reached out to me to put a hand on my shoulder.

In that second, his hand was smacked away.

"You all need to knock it off!"

"Aritomo?!"

"How could this be Urara's fault?"

"No one is saying Tendou did anything wrong."

Shizuku brought her foot down so loud, it echoed throughout the room.

"Shut up! You're making Urara feel bad! Idiots!"

"Hey now, that's ridiculous. We're..."

"If Tsukuyomi was dropping out for this round, why couldn't she have come here and told us in person? That's so dumb! After everyone went to all this trouble!"

Her diatribe started aimed at Mochizuki, then turned to Shinmyou.

"And you! Are you okay with this? Acting like you don't care. You've been used, too. It's all just stupid. All of it!"

"Looks like it's a smorgasbord of stupid today," Mochizuki said, seemingly in awe of Shizuku's rant. She rounded on him, a rabid glare in her eyes, and he immediately fell silent.

"That's right, Dum-Mi! And who cares if Tsukuyomi really is a boy or whatever! Or if that's why he wanted to quit! He was the one who started this in the first place."

"Yeah, but, well..."

"Shut up! I don't know why he was dressing as a girl. I don't want to know. But I can't forgive him for hurting Urara," she declared, taking my hand and heading for the door.

"A-Aritomo?!"

“We’re leaving! Have the car ready for us by the time we’ve finished changing.”

After glancing back at Shimozuru, she quickened her pace, scuffing her feet against the floor. I followed along behind her, her hand protectively gripping mine.

(((

“**YOU** can’t come with us!” Shizuku snapped at Shimozuru as she practically slammed the door in his face. I watched him as the two of us rode off.

She wouldn’t let go of my hand. Not when we went to change nor on the ride home.

My heart had cooled after everything that had happened. The warmth of her hand seemed to be the one thing keeping it going, and for that, I was grateful.

“I’m sorry, Urara,” she offered about thirty minutes into the ride.

“...Why are you apologizing?”

I thought it strange that she would. I glanced at her and saw she had wrinkled her nose. She apologized again.

“You’ve been so down lately, and yet I barely even noticed.”

“Oh, no, I never said anything to you. How could you have known?”

She was my best friend, but there was no way I could have told her Chouko’s secret. But I never intended for her to find out like this, either.

“I was just so caught up in dancing, so oblivious...”

“You were incredible. Even Mochizuki admitted it. You earned that win. You need to be proud of it.”

We continued talking as I lightly stroked her hair, careful to preserve the special style she had it in.

“...Even though it ended on a sour note, we still won, didn’t we?”

"Yes, Shizuku. You won."

"Three wins, two losses. So we beat Tsukuyomi."

"Yes," I said, gazing off in the distance while heaving a sigh.

"This is where the game ends, you know, Urara?"

"Yes. But..."

"But?"

"Some things don't have to come to an end."

I squeezed her hand tighter. In turn, she squeezed mine back.

"You're right," she murmured, letting me know she completely understood everything I wanted to say.

(((

I'M still not sure how I got pulled into it, but Shizuku had seized victory in the Ojousama Challenge, beating Chouko at three wins to two.

However, she still hadn't found herself in a relationship with any of the love interests from *Moonlight Beauty ~Be My Bride~*.

Unlike in most stories, where victory or defeat led to an epic denouement, her success in the competition had ended anticlimactically.

And so, it would be a week before she visited me in the depths of my misery, after a family vacation with souvenirs in hand.

"Still, to think Tsukuyomi was a guy all along. I would never have believed it if I hadn't heard it from you." Shizuku began with that the second she walked into my room.

Not only did she start with a sensitive topic, but she had to rub it right in from the get-go.

"But how did you know? No matter how I look at it, Tsukuyomi was the definition of a young lady. Even if I heard it from the horse's mouth, I still wouldn't believe it."

Her words were loaded. I carefully reflected on how I could explain it to her, but I struggled to find the right words. I settled for starting where I could.

"Um, well, because I saw it."

"Huh, what?"

"...H-Hi..."

"'H-Hi'?"

"His chest."

"Tsukuyomi was naked?!"

"No, he wasn't naked!"

He was absolutely, unequivocally appropriately clothed. I just happened to run into him at the wrong time. And so that was where I began my explanation. The match with Haruto and everything that happened after.

"Hmmm, sounds like your brother and Tsukuyomi were both in the wrong, trying to settle things with kendo like that."

Are you really one to judge them for that, Shizuku?

"Ah well," she said, now that I had explained, and opened the snacks she brought back from her trip.

She said they'd gone skiing in Australia, but the snacks were chocolate macadamia nuts again. I liked them anyway, so I was happy nonetheless.

"So what are you going to do now, Urara?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know. Now that you know Tsukuyomi is a boy, that changes everything about your relationship, right?"

That wasn't the point. No matter what form he took, Chouko was still Chouko. It was just...

"When I think about his chest..."

"What? You can't date a guy without breasts?"

"That's not it!"

Please just forget about breasts for right now. I needed to talk about what was going on in my heart.

"My heart aches. Every time I think about Chouko, it squeezes tighter. I don't know if I could take it if I tried to

reach out and he ignored me.”

Oh, not again. I had thought about this time and again lately, then denied it, only for the thought to arise once more, tossing me into a cycle of increasing despair.

“I don’t want Chouko to hate me,” I whispered, my fears finally given voice.

I wanted him to smile at me again. To hear his kind words. More than ever before. And on and on from here forward. For me. And only me.

“Urara, I knew it...”

Just as Shizuku was about to continue, a loud ringtone reverberated throughout the room.

She pounced on her smartphone and checked the screen. Her eyes narrowed, and she tossed it onto my bed.

“What’s wrong all of a sudden?”

“It’s fine. Just some dumb text.”

On that day, while she was trying to protect me, Shizuku had lashed out at Shimozuru. After we were in the car, I had caught her looking lost in thought.

So maybe that email was from...

“Shimozuru?”

“Huh? No way. It was from the Prince.”

“Whaaat?”

“I dunno why, but ever since that day, he keeps sending me all these weird messages. I really don’t get it at all.”

She grabbed her phone, unlocked it, and showed me. Wait, weren’t these messages private? Was it really okay for me to see them?

“It’s all right, go ahead and have a look,” she said. I peeked out of the corner of my eye and saw pictures of a unique-looking cat.

“Um...it’s a cat.”

“Yes it is. An ugly one, at that.”

“Depends on how you look at it. I think it’s cute.”

“Apparently, it’s the Prince’s cat.”

Every day since then, Mochizuki had sent a picture labeled “Today’s Bergamot.” Neither Shizuku nor I could figure out why he was doing this.

“I don’t get any messages from the person I really want, just junk like this.”

“Shizuku, you’re waiting, aren’t you...? For a message from Shimozuru?”

My words immediately flustered her, and her eyes began moving around, looking anywhere except at me. Finally she relented, seemingly defeated, and nodded her head.

“You really are...”

“Stop, Urara! Just wait a sec. Wait, and don’t say it yet. I know. I know it’s true, but my heart just isn’t ready yet!”

I understood. I understood so much that it hurt.

She felt bad about smacking Shimozuru’s hand and yelling at him. That she hadn’t apologized for going too far, and now the gap between them was growing deeper and deeper.

And now, no matter how much she wanted to see him, she was frozen in fear.

“I can see it in your eyes. You feel the same way, too, don’t you, Urara?”

“Yes...I think I do. Definitely.”

Finally acknowledging it, my true feelings began to flow forth freely from my heart.

Being afraid that the wedding dress had been for Chouko was absolutely because I was feeling jealous.

Because I loved—

I clenched my fist. I was ready.

“Shizuku, can I tell you? About what happened in my past life?”

The story of a feeling I couldn’t quite bring myself to call love.

Annerosa Ortegamo's Memories

MY one source of joy in those days was to gaze out of a tiny fenestella in our family's gloomy, stuffy old mansion, over the glistening waves of the canal, at another world that seemed to teem with life.

"Anne, Annerosa! You're up there again...?!"

"Oh, Mother. I'm sorry. I was searching for something," I apologized as she would insist a lady should, fleeing the fenestella. While she was satisfied with my apology, it was clear I wouldn't be deceiving her so easily.

"I'm going to have Dorio nail this window shut. It is better that you be deprived of light than for you to waste your good looks on commoners."

"Mother, please! They cannot see me all the way from down there and through such a small window, no less."

"Whether they can see you is not the matter at hand, darling. Even just a rumor suggesting that one of them might manage to catch sight of us is disturbing enough."

"Please..."

"It is only a natural concern. You are to become the second princess, after all. We must give them no cause for concern."

Her words bored deep into my heart.

Being an old noble family, the Ortegamos had been counts and countesses for a long time, and while we weren't necessarily dirt poor, our life was far from comfortable.

Because of that, my mother, whose expectations of propriety and manners were unmatched, was hired to be the etiquette tutor for the second prince himself. As His Highness's teacher, my mother earned both ample pride and ample compensation.

Thus, she spent more than half of each month holed up in the palace. During those periods, when I was able to break free of the shackles of her intense demands of propriety, my desire to observe the commoners through whatever crevice I

could find, and eventually my desire to be one of them, grew increasingly stronger.

"Now then, it's time to prepare for this evening's party. I am told the second prince will be present as well. Annerosa, it would seem he has expressed a great deal of interest in seeing you there," she pressed, her earlier displeasure seemingly forgotten in her excitement.

I sighed, that younger boy's strikingly lovely face appearing in my mind.

"Annerosa, you made it."

"Yes, I trust Your Highness is in good health."

The party at the palace had begun. After I gave my greeting to the king and queen, the crowd began to swell around me. I separated from my mother amid her excited greetings to everyone around us, and slipped over to my usual position along the wall, where the second prince himself managed to find me.

"Pink is indeed your color," he said, nodding at my dress before offering me his hand. "Might I interest you in a dance, m'lady Ortegamo?"

"Y-Yes. It would be my pleasure, Your Highness."

I was a bit surprised. He had still seemed so juvenile when last we met, and yet this time, he so confidently guided my steps.

Whether or not he had picked up on my surprise, the thirteen-year-old second crown prince escorted me onto the dance floor with ease.

After we danced to one song, the second prince led me out to the terrace. Refusing the prince's invitation was not an option available to the daughter of a mere count, so I did as I was told.

"Is the old man your escort again today?"

"Yes, Count Barson was kind enough to do so."

"Ah, very well. In that case, I shall be respectful of him. He's no threat."

“Pardon?”

As a seventeen-year-old girl with no marital prospects, I was unable to attend parties such as this without an escort. Those escorts were often relatives.

Lately, it was not a cousin close in age, but my eldest uncle, which made me wonder if my mother had... I regarded the second prince’s face with a discerning eye.

“I am to take on a bride,” he said, in a voice more cheerful than ever before.

“You are?”

“My father, I mean, His Majesty has granted his permission. Of course, there are still many decisions to be made, but...Annerosa, I...”

“Y-Your Highness! You have nothing but my respect and have made an indelible impact on my life. Ever since that day with my mother...”

I was referring to the debutante ball held on my fifteenth birthday. That was the first time I had met the second prince, when he came to see my mother in our antechamber.

I was so nervous that even remembering it now made me feel faint. And yet the way he spoke to me, only a boy of eleven at the time, with such animated gestures, was so charming that it helped calm me.

“Thank you very much, Your Highness. You are by far the most interesting person I have met today!”

“You too, Annerosa! You’re the cutest and prettiest girl here!”

His cheeks bright red, the prince took my hand and kissed the back of it.

It was the one bright spot in my otherwise cold existence as a noble in high society.

It was only natural that it wouldn’t last.

“Your Highness, I will pray that you find a partner who is truly worthy in her status and suitable in age. May you have a truly happy marriage,” I said, then quickly dashed off.

I ignored the second prince calling after me.

“A gift?”

“Yes, from the royal palace. I’m certain it is from the second prince. Your favorite flowers, preserved in sugar for you. My, he even remembered to preserve them as I taught him.”

My mother smiled, holding the box the flowers had arrived in and instructing the maid to prepare some tea.

The fact that he would send me a gift, even though I ran off as I did, lifted my spirits a bit. I could never hate the kind royal. I was actually rather fond of him.

However, I couldn’t bring myself to discuss what had happened. While the Ortegammo family was a noble one that kept up the appearances of proper nobility, it was nigh unthinkable that I could realistically become the second princess.

Ahh, being a noble...how I hated it.

I desperately wanted to become a commoner. To live on the other side of those glistening canals.

And as I bit into those sweets the prince sent me, my consciousness suddenly left my body.

I heard something, once, a voice beyond a purple veil calling out to me.

It sounded as if it was crying or shouting; either way, the voice’s owner was in desperate pain.

And in that time, very unpleasant words like fragments of shattered conversations fell in pieces around me.

“Candidate.”

“His Highness, the Prince—”

“Betrothal—”

“Mistake—”

“The Duke’s—”

Ohh, none of those things mattered anymore.

Someone, please tell that sobbing person not to cry. Please don’t cry for me.

Because I love—
And that was how I let go of my former life as Annerosa
Ortegamo.

(((

FINISHING the story of my past life, I noticed that Shizuku was clutching a tissue box as she blew her nose loudly and dabbed at her tears.

“Hang on a second, I’ll... Just give me a moment...”

She pulled four or five tissues out and pressed them to her face.

“Are you all right?”

“Yes. I’m fine, really... I mean, you’re the one we should be worried about, Urara!”

“Perhaps.”

It was the story of my past life. Not necessarily my past.

“But that second crown prince, though. Urara, you loved him, didn’t you?” she asked, still blowing her nose.

“Not me. Annerosa. And yes, she pined for him. However, if you had asked her about her feelings, it would be difficult for her to have said yes,” I responded honestly.

I had affection for him, but I also couldn’t risk coming off as disrespectful, so I had always tried to strike a balance between the two.

“Really?”

“Yes. He was four years younger, and the difference in status between us was so great, I had to let that dream go. And it was so long ago anyway.”

My life as Annerosa had come to such an abrupt end. I couldn’t say I wasn’t sad about it. But actually talking to Shizuku about it like this made me realize I had mostly made my peace.

Why had I wanted to be a commoner so much? And why had I come to see love in such a negative light?

"I was always just trying to find a way out."

I was finally able to acknowledge it.

And in doing so, I realized that, more important than my past life, there was something in this life I had to do.

That's right. What I wanted to do most of all...

"I want to tell Chouko how I feel."

Naturally, those feelings, and the emotions associated with them, were overflowing.

"I love Chouko, I do. So much so that I'm jealous of anyone else who would have him."

After I finally gave voice to my true feelings for Chouko, it felt as if sunlight had broken through the gloom hanging heavy over my heart.

It was like seeing those canals from my past life in Lacrofine sparkling once more.

There certainly was a sense of irony that I would come from a past life where, as a noble, I was refused the opportunity to mingle with those from lower social statuses, to this life where I, a commoner, would fall in love with someone all but untouchable to me.

But I realized there was no way around it.

Now that I had bared my heart and soul, my face lit up in a brilliant smile.

As I did, Shizuku, who had been dabbing at the corners of her eyes, grabbed me by the hair and shouted in her usual tone.

"You dummy! Save your big dramatic confession for Tsukuyomi!"

"...Oh, yes, you're right."

I felt a little embarrassed after she said that to me. My face grew hot, and I covered it with my hands to cool it down. As I did, Shizuku muttered.

"Now that I think of it...that name Chouko doesn't sound right. He's a boy, right? Do you know his real name?"

"No. But gender is irrelevant. Chouko is Chouko to me, so I don't think the name is strange at all."

Well, maybe a little. After giving it some deep thought, Shizuku slapped her knees.

"All right, why don't we go over there? We might be able to find something out."

"Huh? Go where?"

"Come on, you know!" she said, disregarding my question and essentially making hers the final word. She led me to her family's car, and we were off.

"Ta-da! The Arrows boutique!"

Mr. Agatsuru's shop.

"Why are we here, exactly?"

She merely replied with a "Why, indeed" and blocked out my field of vision. "Well, he knows Chouko but isn't too close like the guys from school. Honestly, the grizzly man was the only person I could think of."

Uh, he hadn't been "the grizzly man" for a long time. He'd shaved his beard ages ago.

Still, he was a famous designer. Would he really be all right with us visiting out of the blue? Just as I was about to ask, a voice called out to us from behind.

"Oh, how've you been? You're looking well as always, Shizuku. Oh, and Urara!"

"It's been awhile, Tendou. Aritomo."

We weren't surprised to see Mikazuki and Izayoi standing there after hearing them greet us so formally and yet in such playful tones. They looked the same as always. It felt as if we had been whisked back in time to when we were preparing for the horseback riding challenge.

Sighing in relief, I turned to them.

"Yes, it has been a while, Mikazuki, Izayoi."

"I'm so glad Dum-Mi isn't with you. Long time no see, Ui-Ui, Shirazu."

Shizuku, honestly...not that again.

Mikazuki couldn't help but laugh at the blunt way she greeted them.

I never had a chance to properly apologize for running out on them at the dance contest. As the cause of that incident, I found myself so embarrassed, I was begging for a hole to curl up and hide in.

We followed the pair into the Arrows boutique. Along the way, we greeted the two female designers who had helped us before, then made our way to the salon.

While the two boys used the changing rooms, we sipped tea. During that time, we learned that, unfortunately, Mr. Agatsuru was out of the shop on other business.

"I'm so sorry for the sudden, unannounced visit."

"It's fine, it's fine. Make yourselves comfortable."

We decided to take them up on their generous offer.

We learned that Mikazuki and Izayoi were there for their new tailcoats.

"Yeah, ours still weren't ready."

"That's to be expected. I mean, Mitsuru and the others pushed for theirs for the danc—*cough, cough*, I mean, they needed theirs first."

So our dance partners had rush-ordered brand-new tailcoats as well, then.

Everyone at Arrows had gone to so much trouble for our group. Now I really did feel sorry.

I kept my feelings quiet, but I wondered why Mikazuki and Izayoi needed new tailcoats soon when they hadn't needed them for our dance contest.

It sounded as if the boys were preparing for some kind of group event. I was beginning to marvel at how different their lives were when, suddenly, they turned their attention to us.

"So, why are you two here today?" Mikazuki asked.

"Um, it's a little embarrassing to explain," I said. What I meant was, *There's no way I can tell you two.*

Close friends would certainly be the best sources for finding out Chouko's true name and identity. But now that I

had realized I was in love with him, I couldn't bring myself to ask them with any sort of composure.

Asking someone older like Mr. Agatsuru would have been difficult enough, but questioning two guys around my age, let alone guys who were extremely close to Chouko, would have been impossible.

I looked to Shizuku, hoping for salvation, but for some reason she had furrowed her brows and had a sour look on her face.

"Is something wrong, Shizuku?"

"...Ugh, dummy."

"What?"

Her eyes had landed on Mochizuki, who had just arrived and stood in an elegant pose. I should have expected no less from someone who called himself the Prince. I remember thinking how rude he was during the dance contest, but I kept quiet.

After sizing Shizuku up, he suddenly approached her with a broad grin.

"Aritomo, good to see you. You haven't responded to any of my messages. Are you doing all right?"

Oh, Shizuku, you didn't respond to him?

The way he addressed her might have been fine, but his attitude certainly wasn't.

"Don't be stupid. How am I supposed to respond to that onslaught of cat pictures?"

...I take that back. Shizuku was the rude one here. Apparently Mochizuki's kindness was easy to miss.

"Her name is Bergamot. There are many facets to her. Her grace. Her refinement."

"Maybe her tiny, flat nose is cute in an ugly sort of way, but how could I tell you that over text?"

Mochizuki merely watched her sour reaction with amusement.

"H-Hey, Urara? Has Mitsuru...been sending pictures of Bergamot to Shizuku?" Mikazuki asked me after appearing

totally out of the loop.

"Yes he has. Apparently every day," I responded.

"Oh brother," he said, covering his face with his hands.

Izayoi ran his fingers across his forehead and hung his head.

"Oh no, this is bad. Shirazu, what do we do?"

"Don't ask me. Diplomacy is your area of expertise, Ui."

"There's no stopping Mitsuru once he's on this path. Not even Oboro could hold him back now!"

Um, what exactly was going on here? I had no idea what deep, dark secrets these photos of Miss Bergamot were hiding.

Mikazuki must have noticed my baffled expression.

"You see, Bergamot is Mitsuru's most prized cat. He only shows that cat-loving side of himself to people he's taken an interest in. He's never once sent those pictures to a girl. Do you get what that means?"

"Uh-huh. I think so. Mochizuki has really taken a shine to Shizuku and... What?"

Wait, whaaat?! Had Shizuku ended up on Mochizuki's route? Even though the Ojousama Challenge had such a poor ending, even though we thought the otome game was over, it was all coming true...?

I had heard about something like this from Kirara, but wow, otome game heroines really were something.

"Why is Mitsuru even here? Did you contact him, Shirazu?" Mikazuki asked.

"No, I had no idea. What about you, Tendou...?"

"N-No. We just ran into him by accident. We came here on a whim."

"Spooky! I don't even want to know how he knew she was here," Mikazuki gave a little shout and grabbed his head, then turned to me and whispered, "Please, Urara. Can you please take Shizuku and get the heck outta here?"

"Oh, all right. I mean, I don't mind, but..."

Mr. Agatsuru, our reason for coming in the first place, wasn't here, so it was no issue for us to leave now. And Mikazuki's question from earlier felt so vague.

I started to urge Shizuku to leave, not even looking at Mochizuki, who had sat himself next to her, when the sound of the salon door slamming open echoed throughout the boutique.

"Aritomo!" Shimosuru panted.

"Oboro!" Shizuku responded, taken aback. "Why are you here?!"

"Why am I here? I mean, Ui told me to come..."

I glanced at Mikazuki out of the corner of my eye and saw that look of terror on his face. Shimosuru noticed Mochizuki had taken up position next to Shizuku. Little sparks were popping up all over the salon. Oh no, was this one of those battle climax scenes? As a beginner to all the ins and outs of romance, I was finding it difficult to breathe.

"And why are you sitting there, Mitsuru?" Shimosuru snarled, his tone making clear he was ready for a fight.



“Why? What’s it to you? The owner of this establishment happens to be a longtime business associate of our family. So what? Did you just come here to interrupt your cousin’s business?”

“What’s this gotta do with business?!”

Shizuku looked a little disturbed at the intensity of their argument.

“What do we do?” she whispered to me. “I never thought Oboro would really show up here...”

“Really? Were you hoping for Shimozuru to show up all along?” I asked.

Her eyes were a little red, and as she danced her fingers along my shoulder, she continued to whisper to me. “Well, no, it’s just, it is his cousin’s boutique, so maybe I was hoping. Ah, but that’s not why I brought you here.”

That’s clearly why you brought me here.

But I understood. We were both maidens in love. We were so fixated on the objects of our affection that we could see nothing else.

She had only to say that I might find out about Chouko to lure me here, so I was in no position to talk.

But seeing the two of them argue...they really did seem like little boys.

“You’re so annoying. She didn’t ask you to come.”

“M-Maybe not, but...” Holding his breath, Shimozuru shot Shizuku a look.

“And anyway, Aritomo thinks Bergamot is cute. So I thought I’d show her the real thing,” Mochizuki said with a loose grin. Shimozuru’s face went pale at those words.

Ahh, so Mochizuki really did only share Miss Bergamot with those he was most fond of.

That didn’t seem to be registering with Shizuku at all, though...

“Huh? What? I never said anything like that. I don’t care about seeing your cat,” Shizuku said, dumbfounded.

Mochizuki was flabbergasted.

"Huh? You did. You said she was ugly but cute. So clearly you think she's cute."

"No, I think she's ugly!"

I didn't think Miss Bergamot was that ugly, but I also reckoned Shizuku's words were less genuine and more a way of getting back at him. After Shizuku firmly rejected him, Mochizuki blinked in rapid succession, clearly at a loss for words.

Shizuku leaped to her feet. She then stood before Shimozuru.

"Aritomo..."

Shimozuru called her name. I was relieved, but the next second, she slapped him across the face.

"Ow!"

"Don't 'ow' me! You hurt me more! And worst of all, you were late!"

I expected nothing less from Shizuku. She had some nerve, blaming him, and yet he was still going along with what she was saying, so it must not have bothered him much. After all, I had no room to argue.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't 'I'm sorry' me! Why haven't you called or messaged me since that day? You didn't even try to come after me."

"Well, you told me not to come after you. And you were so mad, I thought it was better to give you time."

"I was mad. I'm still mad...but..."

"But?"

Her words were so harsh, and yet she seemed so bashful. Slowly, the color returned to Shimozuru's face, and he began to look happy.

"I hated not being able to see you more than anything! You big dummy! Get it through your thick head already!"

"...Aritomo!"

Her feelings finally out in the open, Shimozuru was so overcome, he threw his arms around her.

She let out a weird cry as he hugged her, but I pretended not to hear. I, too, was a love newbie.

"I hated it, too. It was so hard seeing how well you danced with Mitsuru. But I had to bite my tongue."

Shizuku lowered her arms and patted Shimozuru's lower back.

They slowly peeled apart, gazing into each other's eyes.

"But the one I had the most fun dancing with was you, Oboro. There is no one else. You're the only one I want."

Shimozuru pulled Shizuku back into a tight embrace. This time, she didn't make a sound. In that moment, she looked so adorable.

"Well, I wasn't expected Oboro and Shizuku to put on a love scene for us today," Mikazuki whistled.

"Things all worked out in the end, I'd say. Oboro was on their side from the beginning," Izayoi said.

Now I understood why Shimozuru had been so kind to us. In the beginning, it hadn't been love, but over time, he must have been impressed at watching how hard Shizuku fought for her own happiness.

Watching the two off in their own little world, happily confessing their feelings, I couldn't help feeling a little jealous.

Oh, if only that were Chouko and me... The thought made my face suddenly flush.

"Urara, what are you thinking? Is it maybe 'Oh dear, oh dear, whatever shall I do'...?" Mikazuki asked playfully at seeing my red cheeks.

I didn't want him to realize my feelings, but I also wanted to ask him about Chouko. I opened my mouth, trying to figure out how to word it, but was saved by a loud clatter.

"I'm done."

Now cast aside and all but forgotten, Mochizuki leaped to his feet.

"Hey, Mitsuru. Wait up."

"No. I'm leaving."

With that, he strode toward the door. Looking defeated, Mikazuki and Izayoi trailed after him.

All of a sudden, it was just the two lovebirds and myself left.

I couldn't help feeling like an intrusion, so I quietly excused myself.

Congratulations, Shizuku.

As I passed through the salon door, I found myself wishing for her happiness.

Chapter 10: The Lady Wavers

BY the time the first day of the new semester, the first Monday in September, rolled around, everything had completely changed.

First of all, the duties of student council president had passed from Shinmyou, who was in his third year, to Asahina, who was in his second year. St. Delia's Academy didn't hold student council elections. Rather, a student was nominated by the student council president. The rules stated that the new student council would take their positions each September, so the changing of the guard was no surprise.

However, almost every student expected the new student council president to be the Prince himself, Mochizuki, or the studious Izayoi, so the announcement was accompanied by a great deal of surprise.

And more importantly—and more shocking—

“Chouko did?! Wh-Why...why would she?”

“Hey, I don't know, but is it true?”

“Oh dear, and you seemed to be so close, I thought she would have told you herself.”

“Hey! I don't like your tone.”

Aoyama, a girl from our class who was a part of the equestrian club, mocked us without even trying to hide it. I knew she hadn't cared for us since the school festival, but what happened during the horseback riding competition really sealed the deal.

But that wasn't the issue at hand. What really mattered was what she said, not the disdain with which she said it.

“Chouko...transferred?”

My voice was so shaky from the shock, I could barely get the words out right. Why would he do that? Could it have been, would it have been, because of me?

“Oh dear, you really hadn’t heard. I heard she’s going to study abroad in America. Well, she is the cream of the crop, so she’ll probably be able to make the most of her talents over there,” she sneered, sure to get everything out she wanted to say before quickly moving away, likely having sensed Aritomo’s growing rage.

“Tch, if you wanna bring us down so badly, at least give us all the details. Urara, Urara! Are you okay?!”

“Y-Yes... W-We need to find out what’s going on. From Chouko.”

Yes. I needed to know what was going on directly from Chouko so we could get the truth once and for all. No matter how my legs quivered and quaked, I tried to force myself to my feet, only to have my hips give out and fall back into my chair. Shizuku put a hand on my shoulder.

“Just wait here,” she said and ran out of the classroom.

(((

“**NO** good. Tsukuyomi isn’t here today.”

She had gone to Chouko’s class to try to get an answer, but in the end, nothing had come of it.

“I tried to find out where that rumor started. Apparently it was that second-year Hattori. If it smells like a lie, it must be. But...”

Even as she trailed off, I understood what Shizuku wanted to say.

While her family wasn’t as powerful as the Shimozurus or the others’ families, Hattori came from a powerful enough family that it wouldn’t have been unthinkable for her to have heard something from one of her family’s staff members.

Actually, I felt a little nervous walking and talking out loud about all this. What if someone overheard us?

It seemed highly likely that Chouko really was leaving to study abroad.

My hands were limp, and yet as an idea popped into my head, I squeezed them tight. There was someone else, wasn't there, who would know? Why hadn't I thought of it sooner?

"Shizuku, what about Shimozuru? It looks like he's out. Have you heard anything from him about Chouko?"

Shizuku and Shimozuru had confessed their love for one another only a week ago. Shimozuru was one person I didn't mind sharing my true feelings with. But most of all, I just wanted to know what was going on.

The second I mentioned him, though, Shizuku furrowed her brow and put her hands together in apology.

"I'm sorry, Urara. I actually won't be able to get in touch with Oboro for the next two weeks."

"Really?! Shimozuru, too?"

"Mm-hm. He won't tell me why, either, but he swore up and down that it was one hundred percent not cheating. It was something he couldn't get into, even with me, so I just had to let it go. If I had known he was hiding something like this, I would have made him tell me," she lamented, scratching her head. But she wasn't to blame.

"It's not your fault, Shizuku. Please don't give it another thought."

"Well, I did break our promise and call him once."

Shizuku had always done what she wanted, after all.

"But I got a message that either the power was off or it was out of service."

"There's nothing we can do about it. Thank you for thinking of me. But you can't break your promise."

"It's all right. I'll explain it to him later," she said, sticking out her tongue. Seeing her so playful like that calmed my fears about Chouko for the moment.

(((

“URARA, um...can I?”

Haruto had come to my room and spoken to me for the first time since the kendo incident. In the past half month, he had scarcely said more than “Good morning” to me.

“What is it, Haruto? You may come in.”

His words from that day still rang in my ear. Things between us had been awkward, and we couldn’t seem to completely patch things up.

I was relieved Haruto was finally speaking to me, so it was a shock that the first thing he would ask me about was Chouko.

“How are things going, with your friend Tsukuyomi?”

“Mm... He hasn’t been coming to school.”

“Huh?”

“Apparently, he’s going to be studying abroad. Though I still don’t know if that’s true or not...”

Haruto’s mouth gaped at my words, and his face seemed to go pale. “What is that idiot doing?” he shouted.

“What’s gotten into you?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, Urara,” he apologized over and over to me, tears forming in his eyes. “I said if I won that day, he wasn’t allowed to come near you. So I’m sure that’s why...”

This was the first time I’d heard that was one of the conditions of Haruto winning their match.

But could that really have been why Chouko was avoiding me? I saw cracks in his mask for the first time at the dojo. I thought that, even though he lost, he was having fun.

So maybe there was another reason? This possibility seemed more and more likely.

“Hey, Sis. I’ll try calling him. Let’s get the answer straight from him.”

“Do you know Chouko’s number, Haruto?”

"Yeah. It's still in my call history. Hang on," he said and ran to grab his smartphone. He searched through the numbers.

"Here," he said, holding up the screen for me to see.

There was no name or anything, but thinking that those numbers could bridge the gap between Chouko and me, I just couldn't hold myself back.

"Haruto, I'm sorry, but may I call?"

Haruto silently handed over his phone. Chouko might not answer, but I had to try.

My fingers gently pressed the call button, and once the sounds of the dialed numbers subsided, the ringing of the line resounded in my ears.

Just the thought that I might get to talk to him brought tears to my eyes.

"Chouko..."

It rang fifteen times without an answer, but I was happy just to know he hadn't rejected me outright.

Haruto promised to lend me his phone again the next day, enabling me to sleep that night.

Even in my dreams, I was clutching that phone, gazing out the window at the lovely half moon. For some reason, the moon began to fill as it rose, and it reminded me of those words on the cafe terrace.

"But don't you want to be able to talk to your boyfriend?"

"I believe absence makes the heart grow fonder. Like the anticipation of awaiting the next phase of the moon."

Why did I give such a cheeky answer to Mikazuki's question back then?

Those were the pretty words of someone with no experience with love.

Only a short time had passed, and yet I was desperate to call again. Even if he didn't answer, I wanted to hang on the line for longer. My chest was getting so hot, it hurt. I didn't want to hang up. I wanted us to be connected forever.

I struggled to suppress the need to scream out that I wanted to call him right now as the moon began to change phases.

“I want to see him.”

I wanted to see him so bad, I couldn't wait for the waxing and waning of the moon. After thinking that, my consciousness melded with the dream.

(((

“**YOU** called again last night?”

“Yes. He hasn't told me not to.”

After school, we met in that clubroom by the stables, as this was not a conversation I was comfortable having amid a large crowd.

About a week had passed since I had started calling Chouko.

Each night, I would borrow Haruto's phone and call him.

He hadn't answered even once, but even hearing the ringing of the phone was enough to make me feel closer to him.

Shimozuru had been absent the whole time, just as he had warned Shizuku he would be. And Mochizuki and the others had also been absent.

“I tried Ui-Ui and Shirazu, too, but no luck there, either. Same as Oboro.”

So everyone had their smartphones off. Which meant we had no choice but to wait another week for them.

A sigh escaped my lips.

“I just wish we could talk to someone.”

“Weren't Aoyama and the others acting strange? Maybe I should try forcing them to spill what they know?”

“No, please don't push them any further.”

Hattori and her friends hadn't been shy about announcing on the first day of school that Chouko was

studying abroad, but after that, they avoided us, or acted as if they were going to run whenever we came near.

"Let's just wait. You're patiently waiting for Shimozuru, after all. So I can, too."

I clenched my fist, trying to reassure myself. Shizuku glanced at me and looked as if she wanted to say something.

It will be all right. Please don't worry about me, Shizuku.

"Urara..."

"I haven't made any tea yet. Please wait a moment, I'll go do it now..."

"Urara! Let's try...to call one more person!"

"Who?"

Who exactly were we going to try to call? She grabbed my hand as I reached for the teacups.

"I didn't want to if we didn't have to, but...I guess beggars can't be choosers."

As she gritted her teeth, she showed me her phone screen. On it were displayed the words "Cat Dork."

"That dummy. He's still been sending me those cat pics all week, so I know his phone should definitely be on!"

Before I could comment on the fact that Mochizuki hadn't given up and she might be on her way to a love triangle route, she yanked the phone out of my hand and jabbed the screen.

Her phone had been switched to speaker, and I could hear it ringing. I watched her face as, in the middle of the third ring, the sound cut out and a loud, magnanimous voice boomed throughout the clubroom.

"Finally realized the true cuteness of Bergamot, have you, Aritomo?"

"I'll be fine not knowing it for my whole life."

The interaction between the two of them hadn't changed a bit, but I was in a hurry, so I cut in.

"Where's Chouko? Mochizuki, what's happening with Chouko?! We heard a rumor...that he was going to study

abroad.”

I understood this was a breach of etiquette, but I simply could not help myself. Mochizuki did not seem at all surprised as he calmly answered my question with another question.

“Tendou? Where are you calling from?”

“We’re calling from the equestrian clubroom,” I answered. “The new one.”

“I see. That’s a safe place to talk, then.”

We heard him lightly tapping on something before he continued in a hushed tone.

“Chouko Tsukuyomi will never return to that school again. It has already been decided.”

I already had that feeling, but hearing Mochizuki declare it so plainly dashed any lingering hope I might have had.

“Is that really true?”

“There’s no point in lying now. Did you two just call me hoping I would ease your fears?”

Or were you hoping for something more, it sounded like he was implying.

I was.

“No. No, I want to see Chouko. I want to see Chouko and talk things out,” I said, letting Mochizuki know how I felt.

Wasn’t there some way to get my feelings across to Chouko? Just as I rose, ready to ask this, he responded in a cold voice. “This weekend, during the Full Moon Festival, we will have very special ceremony.”

“A ceremony?”

“Attending and participating in the ceremony and feast will be Chouko Tsukuyomi’s final duty.”

Chouko’s final duty? Then that would likely be my last chance to see him.

If there was even a possibility, then I had to try.

“Mochizuki, please. Is there any way I can get an invitation?” I pleaded, my heart overflowing with hope. I

folded both hands in front of my chest, praying hard.

"Please, Mitsuru! We're counting on you!" Shizuku pressed, trying to help me.

Hearing our entreaties, Mochizuki gave a little sigh. "It's not going to be a pleasant experience for you two."

"We can take it."

"It's going to be hard to watch. There will be a lot of nasty people. I'm being honest."

"It doesn't bother us. We don't mind."

I couldn't sit around waiting any longer.

If I couldn't get through to him without going to him, then I would go. I would run. No matter how far.

"All right. I'll send a car for you the day of. Make sure you're ready."

Having heard my resolve, Mochizuki granted my request, his voice softened.

(((

"PLEASE wait here for a moment. They are still preparing for the banquet."

On the day of the fifteenth, the middle-aged man in the suit whom we met before picked us up at Mochizuki's behest and brought us to the Arrows boutique.

All our classes were in the morning, so I expected he would pick me up from my house just after noon, but to my surprise, he came straight to the school.

Still, ever since our call with Mochizuki, Shizuku and I had both been impatiently waiting for this day to come. We happily hopped into the car.

"Are you okay, Urara? Not nervous, are you?"

"Yes, I'm okay. Somehow."

That was a lie. The truth was that my heart was thundering in my chest like a drum. Yet I tried to pretend I was fine.

The night before, I had used Haruto's phone to try to call Chouko again. He didn't answer, but before I hung up, I promised I'd see him the next day.

So I couldn't allow my nerves to get the better of me when I finally got to see him.

I flashed Shizuku a smile. At that moment, the two ladies who worked at Arrows charged over to us.

"Shizuku! Urara! Good to see you! Now, we don't have much time, so let's give you two the works!"

"First, to the beauty room. We're gonna give you a glow-up from top to bottom. We'll then get you in undergarments and have your hair and makeup done."

"Tehehe. We have plans for you both, just you wait. Now, now, don't just stand there staring. Let's go!"

They shouted and spirited us out of the salon. Before Shizuku and I even knew what was happening, we were lying down in the beauty room.

"Wow. These people are crazy."

"They're certainly something. They're giving us makeovers from head to toe."

I had no idea why a designer boutique would also house a beauty salon, but getting a makeover from a professional esthetician was a first for me, in both this life and my last. My skin felt so shiny and springy.

We were moved next to get our hair and makeup done, but our hairstyles were completely different from how they were done for the dance competition. Shizuku's loose updo, interwoven with fresh flowers, was a perfect complement to her bright-orange dress.

The ladies insisted my hair would look good partially down, so my hair was given a half updo on the top and sides, with the back falling free in light curls and accented with a hair accessory that looked as if it were made with twigs.

"I'm sorry we don't have new dresses for you."

“And the grizzly man promised he would!” Shizuku complained.

“We so wanted to make them for you.”

They chatted away as they helped us into the dresses.

That wasn’t a problem for me. After all, we had only worn them once, and for me, the person I wanted to see me in mine still hadn’t.

“No, this dress is just fine. Thank you for wanting to make us new ones. I appreciate your help.”

They met my polite words with smiles and thumbs-up. Their cheerfulness was starting to ease my anxiety.

Once we were done with our preparations, we looked at ourselves in full-body mirrors. The girls standing before us were unrecognizable, but undeniably ladies.

“Incredible...”

“Urara, you look so pretty!”

“You’re very lovely, too, Shizuku!”

“Don’t forget this,” the oldest-looking lady said as she produced a large velvet case.

Within that case was a charming necklace with several pearls, crowned with a large teardrop-shaped pearl at its center.

“This is yours, Shizuku. It goes well with your outfit. And, Urara, this one is yours,” she said, producing another necklace, a dainty pearl choker.

“This is far too valuable for me.”

“Not at all. The bear—er, I mean, the boss insisted that you wear it.”

She slipped behind me before I could say another word and put the necklace around my neck. When I gazed at myself in the mirror, I saw that a lovely butterfly-shaped pendant hung from the center of the choker.

“A butterfly?”

Butterflies reminded me of Chouko’s name.

“Yes. Now you’re both ready! Show off those lovely makeovers!”

Applause filled the room, and thus, we were ready.

“Give it your all!”

“We’re rooting for you!”

That’s right. They went to all this trouble to make us look our best. Now I had to see Chouko, to let him see their hard work. I knew he would love it.

We let out a final shout to psyche ourselves up before straightening up and putting our game faces on.

We had arrived at Arrows just after noon, but by the time we had received the full makeover, it was already dusk. Just as we were finishing up, the same chauffeur arrived to pick us up. To our surprise, and likely out of consideration for our rather large gowns, the car—or rather, limousine?—that came for us this time was much larger than the one that brought us.

“It will be a long ride, so you will find some drinks in there for you. Please do not hesitate to press that button if you need anything else,” the man said and stepped away from the door.

“Wait!” I called out to him. “Where exactly are we going?”

He stopped immediately but maintained his calm demeanor as he responded.

“You have been there before. The White Lily Room has been prepared for you to utilize until the banquet.”

He stepped away and closed the door quietly.

“I had a feeling that’s where we were going.”

“Seems that way. I thought it was some type of meeting place. It has all those side rooms and can likely accommodate overnight visitors as well.”

“Whoooa, the Prince’s family really is loaded.”

Agreed. Being able to claim ownership of such a massive property alone was a big deal. And thinking that Chouko’s family was said to have even more wealth than the Mochizuki family, I couldn’t even imagine what his house looked like.

It was understandable, then, that anyone else seeing a commoner like me aiming for someone so out of my league would be skeptical.

Even so, I had resolved myself. To live this life without regrets.

"Well, at least we know where we're going and what time we can expect to get started."

"You're right. I suppose we may as well enjoy the ride. Let's make this night one to remember," I said and struck a pose.

(((

BY the time we arrived at the Mochizuki family banquet hall, the sun had long since set and the building was dimly lit. Our driver called from beyond the privacy curtain to let us know we had arrived. He then opened the door for us, and a cool breeze caressed our cheeks.

Taking a step out of the limousine, I realized this place was completely different from last time.

Bathed in the light of the chandeliers at the building's entrance were hordes of people. Everywhere. And all of them clad in their finest evening attire.

And thanks to our driver letting us out right in front of the main entrance, we quickly garnered the curious attention of many of those guests.

"Whoa, what is this? This is crazy."

"Shizuku, stay quiet. Place your hands in front of you. Straighten out your back and jut your chin out just a tad," I advised, then allowed my face to ease into a graceful smile.

What an incredible sight. We truly looked like the long-secret daughters of some rich family. The curious glances being sent our way quickly shifted from mere curiosity to something else. As they did, the man from last time, Mr. Yamanashi, appeared before us and welcomed us.

“Miss Aritomo, Miss Tendou, allow me to show you to the White Lily Room. This way, please.”

“All right,” we said, but our voices were drowned out by the din around us growing even louder. I was too afraid of making a spectacle of myself to look around.

I turned quickly to the source of the loudest voices, gave a brief smile and bow, and followed Mr. Yamanashi. The person I had bowed to was likely getting even more upset, but I had decided to pretend not to see her, and I continued making my way inside.

“That was them, wasn’t it? Hattori and her groupies?”

Ah, my suspicions were confirmed. I wondered if they were worked up because they knew we had been granted the White Lily Room.

This room, however, was different from the one we had last time.

“This place is incredible too, but— ...But wasn’t the White Rose Room ritzier?”

“Yes, definitely. I think that room is for higher-ranked individuals. Based on the placement, the size, and even the furnishings,” I said, using logic from my past life.

“Well, why was everyone so shocked we were getting this room, then?” Shizuku asked. “Is there something we’re missing? Like...it’s haunted?”

I think you’re overthinking it, Shizuku.

“Pff, haunted! Hahaha!” someone cracked up laughing.

“Your brainless prattling never ceases to amuse me,” a voice chided, not from beyond the door but from inside the room.

“Shut up, Saku. I like that side of her!”

“Oboro! Wait, how long have you been here?”

“Uhh... Shizuku, I’m glad I finally got to see you again. You’re as lovely as ever.”

I was taken aback by our surprise reunion, but what shocked me even more was the way Shimozuru seemed to notice only Shizuku. Still, she *was* lovelier than ever. He

approached and took her hands in his. Smiling, he appraised her dress. The way he was acting was enough to make even me swoon.

But more importantly, how and why were Shimozuru, Shinmyou, and Mikazuki, who was practically rolling about with laughter, in here with us?

"I suspect you're wondering how we managed to get in here," Mikazuki teased. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes. You couldn't have gotten in through the door, right?"

"This room and the Royal Lotus Room are connected through a secret door. It's complicated to unlock the door, and only close family know its secrets."

That made sense. But why were they so surprised to see us here? I tilted my head quizzically.

"Well, this room is only for either our fiancées, or candidates to be our fiancées," Mikazuki answered without hesitation. "Now do you get it?"

"To be honest, no one save for the staff have ever even entered this room."

"What?! I can't have that!"

If Chouko even thought that I was one of their fiancées, it could ruin everything.

"Is that bad?" Shinmyou asked.

"Yes, for me it is."

"Then tell us," Shinmyou said. "Tell us who you really are. Tell us everything. If you refuse, then I'll announce to everyone here that you're going to be marrying me."

I held my breath without realizing I was doing it. What was he thinking?

"...What ar—"

"What was that?! How could you do that to her?!"

It had been ages since Shizuku interrupted me, but it was unnecessary. I could stand on my own now, so I cut her off.

"Shinmyou, I cannot do as you ask."

“Why not? It would not be good for you to have rumors circulating about you.”

“No, it wouldn’t. But neither would me giving in to your threats anymore. If those are my choices, I’d rather leave right now than have Chouko think I betrayed him.”

He raised his eyebrows, but he wasn’t ready to relent just yet. “If you leave now, you won’t be able to see Chouko. What a pity that even after you begged Mitsuru, you’d throw it all away.”

“I know where Chouko’s room is.”

Shinmyou’s shoulders jumped in shock. I could already tell my guess was likely spot-on.

“The White Rose Room. While the accommodations in this room are fine, the White Rose Room is something different entirely. So it’s only natural that an upper-echelon family like Chouko’s, one that prizes social status, would have him in that room.”

That, and I remembered the rose garden Chouko had taken me to. There, he gave me a white rose. I couldn’t help wondering if the flower that bloomed in that special place wasn’t the signature flower of the Tsukuyomi family.

“If you insist on playing games, then I will wait in front of the White Rose Room until I am allowed to see Chouko face-to-face. How does that sound?” I turned to face Shinmyou, determination hardening my expression.

The air in the room had become icy. Shinmyou finally exhaling seemed to release all that tension.

“You really are constantly full of surprises,” he muttered. Staring straight into my eyes, he began to explain. “Tonight is the Full Moon Ceremony, where the eldest son of the Mochizuki family is to wed the eldest daughter of the Tsukuyomi family. If you don’t want to be kicked out of here, then I suggest you stay put until everything is said and done.”

I couldn’t breathe. His words were such a shock that I couldn’t seem to breathe.

My brain wasn't processing his words properly. Somehow, finally, I managed to formulate some of my own.

"You mean Mochizuki and...Chouko?"

"Yes."

"Saku! Don't say anything else!" Shimozuru shouted.

However, Shinmyou met his demand with a response. "I'm sure everyone here knows the story. The marriage proposal, the marriage itself, the parting, and finally, the return to the moon. That has been the fate of the emissaries of the moon, the Tsukuyomis, for hundreds of years."

My mouth was agape. This ritual, which sounded like the plot of "The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter," the story of Princess Kaguya, had been going on for hundreds of years? I turned back to Shizuku with a confused glance. Had she known? She vigorously shook her head, so passionately that her entire body seemed to be denying it.

"A rising family like the Aritomos wouldn't have known all of this," Shinmyou said. "Nor would they have been invited to a hallowed ceremony like this, one steeped in centuries of tradition."

"Hey, you don't have to..."

"Still, only a handful of people present are aware that Chouko isn't a girl. The only one in our generation besides us who knows is Kiyoharu."

It was surprising to think people who treasured a ceremony so would allow such a reckless oversight. But still...

"Think of it like the tales of humans marrying nonhumans. Another version of a man taking a celestial bride, if you will. At least, carrying on a tradition that embodies those ideals has allowed our families to flourish."

I understood now why Shinmyou was so obsessive about propriety and tradition. He had been told over and over again since childhood that it was his job to protect those traditions. It was very much like the customs that bound me in my past life as the daughter of a count.

However, it sounded as if all the sacrifices were being pushed on the Tsukuyomi family.

Had Chouko lived as a girl this whole time because of these traditions? Something was boiling over deep within me.

"Hey, what did you mean by 'return to the moon'? I get that you meant marriage and divorce in name alone, but..." Shizuku asked, impatiently tugging on Shimozuru's sleeve. He had been silently listening, but now he turned to her, a resigned look on his face.

"Literally, she will return to her home with the Tsukuyomis. And inherit the family name. The Tsukuyomi family has always been matrilineal, because they rarely bore any sons."

"But Tsukuyomi...is a boy, isn't he? So what's going to happen? Once he returns, everyone will find out he's a boy, right?"

"Well..." Shimozuru hesitated. Shizuku was about to press him further when Shinmyou stepped in.

"That's why he's being sent abroad. And why we said that Chouko Tsukuyomi will never appear before us again."

"No, I can't take it! I don't want Chouko to disappear forever!"

I was so loud, I had surprised even myself. Mikazuki, Shimozuru, and even Shizuku all stared at me, wide-eyed. The only one still remaining composed, Shinmyou, fixed me with a bitter smile.

"How easy it is for a commoner like yourself to say something so selfish. But there is nothing to be done about this. Unless you are secretly a princess or something? You're nothing next to Mochizuki and Tsukuyomi."

Of course I wasn't anyone when compared with their families. Even so, maybe if I told them who I was and got them to accept it, they might actually listen to me.

In that case, I would tell them.

I—

"In my past life, I was the eldest daughter of Count Ortegamo of the kingdom of Lacrofine, Annerosa Ortegamo. I may not look the part, but I was once a member of the nobility and have received a full education in the ways a noblewoman should conduct herself." I punctuated my introduction with a deep curtsy.

Just as when I had introduced my past life to Shizuku, everyone in the White Lily Room fell silent.

Even though Shizuku, too, had memories of a past life, she had fallen silent at my revelation. But certainly the others here, who had no past life experience, likely also had no idea how to respond to a declaration such as mine. This was to be expected.

As I squeezed both hands tightly, hoarse laughter broke out in the room.

"Pff! Hahaha! That explains a lot. You're funny," Shinmyou said, laughing in a mocking tone. "Never did I expect that your ladylike demeanor was the result of such a wild delusion. I must say I am impressed that this has all boiled down to the ramblings of an insane girl."

"What did you say?! You're calling Urara's story a delusion? Don't be stupid!"

"Who's 'being stupid' here? Who would believe a story like that? Or do you also believe yourself to have a past life as well?" he fired back, his words dripping with disdain. They sent Shizuku into a frenzy.

"Yeah, that's right! I knew Oboro long before I was born into this world!"

Shizuku...you can't risk your place here letting it all out, too. I tried to stop her before she got too far, but Shimosuru, overcome with emotions, grabbed both of her hands.

"Shizuku, I had no idea you felt so strongly! I, too, feel like I've known you long before I was born."

"What? Oboro, that's not what I meant!"

Shimosuru was in rare form tonight, but if that meant he merely misinterpreted Shizuku's words, then that was

fine. I shot her a look, imploring her not to press any further.

I once again turned to face Shinmyou. "I respect you for not accepting the idea of reincarnation so easily. However, this is the secret source of my education as a noble that you were so interested in before. If you want to believe this is all a thin veneer masking a delusional girl, then it is your freedom to do so," I declared, standing tall.

This was the first time in a long time that the noble behaviors I had once cast aside served me so well.

And if I was sharing the truth with them anyway, there was no reason to hold back any longer. I took a step toward Shinmyou, as if to give one final push.

Since I didn't have a fan, I used my hand to cover my mouth and averted my gaze a tad before speaking once more. "Let it be said, though, the way you menace and intimidate young ladies is not the way a true gentleman would conduct himself," I said.

Mikazuki, who had been silent until that moment, clapped as he stepped between myself and a very sour Shinmyou.

"I'm pretty sure you have to take the L for this round, Shinmyou. Accept what she's saying. All right, Urara, let's say you were a noblewoman in your past life. It's honestly more believable than, say, a commoner like you being sent to assassinate Mitsuru and the others."

"What? I never thought she was an assassin," Shinmyou fired back, annoyed. "That was all... Well, it doesn't matter."

I see. So that was how they thought of me.

I suppose it made sense. I seemed so very out of place. No wonder I was such a thorn in the side for Shinmyou, someone so fixated on protecting the Mochizukis, the Tsukuyomis, and all the traditions that came with them.

"So, what now, Saku? It's almost time. Do we take them or not?" Mikazuki asked, glancing at the clock on the sideboard.

Shinmyou let out a little sigh. He appeared to be in deep thought.

"Let's go," he said and made his way to the interior of the room.

He stopped only once and, without turning back, spoke to us.

"Her Highness will require an escort. I'll send Shirazu and Oboro back shortly, so they will accompany you both to the banquet."

Shizuku and I exchanged glances, taken aback at his concession.

"See you later," Shimosuru said to Shizuku, his face breaking into a full grin. He then quickly trailed after the other two.

Being called "Her Highness" when I had only been the daughter of a poor noble was quite enjoyable, if not a bit embarrassing.

Beside me, Shizuku called after them. "Hey, let me warn you all. Urara wasn't just the daughter of a noble. She was to be married to a prince!"

What was she saying?! I wasn't "to be married" to him! I wasn't even a candidate! I wasn't even in the running!

My head was pounding.

"Is that so? We'll keep that in mind," Shinmyou replied, bemused.

I wanted to shout back that they needn't keep anything in mind, but the door slammed shut.

Please don't say pointless things like that, Shizuku.

(((

"IZAYOI, are you sure you're all right escorting me?"

"Yeah, of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

Just as Mr. Yamanashi had arrived to inform us that the banquet was beginning, Izayoi and Shimosuru arrived to

escort us.

Naturally, Shimozuru offered his arm to Shizuku and, her cheeks reddening, she accepted. As she did, Izayoi offered me his hand, looking a bit flustered.

I wondered if Shinmyou had pushed him into it.

"I was simply worried that I might have put you out if there were other girls you were hoping to escort."

"Nah, after hearing about your past, I'm more worried I'm the one holding you back."

"Oh my, then we're both in the same position," I said with a giggle. He finally looked relieved. Glancing up at him, I realized there was something pale about his neck. "Is this foundation?"

"H-Huh? What, where?"

"Here, on your neck."

He immediately began scratching at his neck. I tried to warn him about his gloves, but as I feared, the flesh-colored powder sullied his lily-white gloves.

"Aww, man."

He always seemed so calm and composed, it was a nice surprise to see a more reckless side to him. We still hadn't made it to the banquet hall, so Izayoi called out to Mr. Yamanashi and requested a new pair of gloves.

"Please wait a moment," he replied and slipped off.

Izayoi turned back to me. "Tendou, I always thought you seemed surprisingly at ease with matters of high society, but...I never would have thought it was because of a past life experience."

"I see Shinmyou and the others must have told you. Yes, that's right. But I'm sure you don't believe me that easily, do you?"

I knew it sounded a little combative, but Izayoi was the most intelligent of their group. I worried that he more than anyone would find it crazy.

"No, actually, I'm happy to finally have an answer to the questions I've had," he said. It was a surprisingly succinct

response.

Clearly he could read the surprise in my eyes, as he lowered his voice and continued. "You sang that song, after all. Back at the piano competition."



"Y-Yes. I did."

"I've been searching all over for languages that sounded like that, but I couldn't find anything. Thinking that those words came from a country and a language none of us have ever heard of actually makes sense."

Oh...that Lacrofinian song I somehow worked up the courage to sing. I thought I had thrown everyone off my trail, but apparently that was not the case.

I never would have thought he would have remembered a song that I sang only once like that. I was impressed by Izayoi's recollection. And his mental flexibility.

"But why did you put so much effort into researching that?" I asked.

I expected him to say it was because he couldn't accept that it was a language he didn't know, but his face suddenly reddened and became flustered.

"Well...I just thought it was so lovely, I had to know," he said, blushing as he praised my Lacrofinian language.

"Thank you very much for saying something so kind. And for believing in me," I said, speaking from the bottom of my heart. His face grew redder still.

"Yes, thank you as well. ...I'm happy I was finally able to tell you."

Just as his whispered words reached my ears, Mr. Yamanashi appeared with a new pair of gloves and quickly ushered us on toward the banquet hall. I still had more to ask, but Izayoi looked so at peace that I decided not to. We moved quickly toward the banquet hall.

We entered through the same door as we had for the dance contest, but this time it was much livelier, filled with guests. The grand chandeliers were twinkling, and dresses of various colors and designs swept about the floor.

With Izayoi as my escort, our progression through the hall earned me lots of stares. The curiosity that had greeted me back at the entrance was nothing compared with the

heavy stares I encountered here, a mix of jealousy and numerous other emotions.

Occasionally, someone would call out a question to Izayoi, but he responded with “No, she’s just a friend,” and that seemed to quell any further animosity.

“Urara! Hey! Over here!”

“Shizuku, thank you so much.”

Shizuku, who had reached the banquet hall long before we had, greeted me with a drink.

“Oh man. Can you believe Oboro? Everyone we meet, he has to say, ‘She’s my girlfriend, she’s my girlfriend.’ It’s so embarrassing.”

Even as she said this, she didn’t let go of his arm. They were very clearly the picture of a happy couple.

“Well, it’s a good time to do it. If I didn’t introduce you and let people know, it might be a big deal later on.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked, but he cut her off, motioning for me to come closer and dropping his voice as low as he could. “Once this is all over, we will no longer be considered Chouko’s suitors, Mitsuru included. We’ll all be free.”

“The pressure from other affluent families with daughters will be more intense,” Izayoi added.

So that was the meaning behind those envious gazes.

Wait, I hadn’t realized that all of them had been considered suitors. This was the first I’d heard of it. Was that why Chouko was considered the otome game’s villainess?

“Wait, Oboro, you were one of Tsukuyomi’s suitors as well?” Shizuku immediately let go of his arm and glared at him. He grasped her hand and pleaded with her.

“Not anymore. I backed out a long time ago. I didn’t propose to Chouko during the ceremony. I promise! Right, Shirazu?”

“...Well, no, he didn’t propose, though he was still there,” Izayoi mumbled, backing him up in a less than convincing way.

As I watched their exchange, Mikazuki joined us. “Hey! The Return to the Moon Ceremony is starting! It’s the last of the Full Moon Festival rituals.”

Just as he said that, the door at the head of the room slowly opened.

Mochizuki appeared first, accompanied by solemn music. His hair was slicked back, just as it had been during the dance contest, and seeing his body in that tailcoat was enough to leave the young ladies present in a tizzy.

It was natural that someone dubbed “the Prince” would have a saunter and an air about him that could charm every girl who laid eyes on him.

As he reached the center of the banquet hall, another door opened at the front.

As it did, we could see someone clad in a wedding dress adorned with lace. Several long veils covered the person’s upper half, so we couldn’t see their face, let alone their expression. However, that was clearly the neatly tailored lace and long train dress we had seen that day in the Arrows boutique.

“Chouko...”

One step at a time, he drew closer to Mochizuki. Those squeals and shrieks from the girls felt like a lifetime ago. The room had become silent, the air itself tranquil.

Then the two joined hands. A group of adorable children approached and pulled away the dress’s train.

“Look. The two of them will share just one dance. And then Chouko Tsukuyomi will leave this place and return to ‘the moon,’” Mikazuki whispered in my ear.

That meant I had only a short window of time before they finished and left the floor. It was my last chance to reach Chouko. After that, I wouldn’t be able to find Chouko, let alone talk to him.

I clenched my fists and took a deep breath.

All eyes were on the pair, leaving them no room for error.

And as the relaxed rhythm of the waltz began to play, they began to move, without lifting the veil covering Chouko's face.

Their elegant steps were perfectly in sync. Everyone watching held their breath. I could hear sighing around me. The dance was entrancing, but something wasn't right. That wasn't Chouko's dance.

Mochizuki himself had said Chouko had not danced even once. I had promised to dance with him, but we had never had the chance, so I had never seen it myself.

Even so, I could be certain. That was not the way Chouko danced.

The timing of the steps, the length of the pauses—I had seen that dancing before. That was definitely—

“Urara, hey, it's gonna be over soon. Are you okay with this?”

Shizuku's panicked words reached me just as the dance concluded with the last step.

Everyone still seemed steeped in the mesmerizing movements of their dance.

And then, the two of them silently let go of each other's hands. The person in the white wedding dress turned their back on Mochizuki and slowly, awkwardly, made their way back to the door.

I had so many chances to call out to him as he went. Shizuku put her hands on my shoulders and called my name over and over.

But I couldn't move.

That wasn't Chouko.

My mind was swimming with questions. Why wasn't Chouko here? Why was *he* there in his place?

Had everyone really not noticed?

The one dancing with Mochizuki was—

—without a doubt, Shinmyou.

Chapter 11: The Lady, Wooed

JUST as Shinmyou, his face still hidden, was about to exit through the door at stage right, a burst of excitement echoed throughout the room.

I followed everyone else's gazes to that same door, from which a boy in a tailcoat had exited. His short black hair shone in the light. As his cool eyes gazed around the room, the din quieted down.

That boy had the same face as Chouko, the same refined air, but he introduced himself with a different name.

"The Return to the Moon Ceremony is now complete. Chouko Tsukuyomi has returned to the moon. As the head of our family, I, Kogetsu Tsukuyomi, would like to finish the evening's festivities by offering up my prayers for the prosperity of the Mochizukis, the Tsukuyomis, and all present."

As his sonorous voice announced the ceremony's end, the silence was shattered by a round of applause.

Uncertain of what was happening, Shizuku and I started looking around. As we did, I could hear words of welcome spreading throughout the room.

"Oh, he's the eldest son."

"He's back."

I looked to Mikazuki for an explanation, but as I did, a familiar voice called me from behind him.

"Urara!"

"...Chouko!"

The person pushing through the surging crowds, making his way toward me, was without a doubt my Chouko.

And yet, at the same time, he wasn't the Chouko I knew.

Who was this person, so impeccable in his tailcoat? This handsome boy bathed in the hungry stares of hordes of young ladies. I was the one who had been so desperate to see him, and yet now that I had my chance, I was suddenly afraid of this stranger.

"I've so wanted to see you, Urara."

As have I. So much so that I continued to call you, even when you wouldn't answer.

But for some reason, the words just wouldn't come out.

In spite of my timidity, Chouko stood before me. With a graceful motion, he slid a white rose from the breast pocket of his tailcoat and placed it in my hair.

"It suits you perfectly," he breathed.



A commotion arose around us.

“Who was that the Tsukuyomi boy just gave a white rose to?”

The whispered words rippled throughout the room like a game of Telephone. Ah, so Chouko really was the eldest child of the Tsukuyomi family. He had downplayed his significance. He paid their chatter no mind, instead offering me his hand.

“May I have this dance? We promised, after all.”

Yes, the promise we made that day. I remembered. Of course. I had been so dedicated to practicing the guy part. But the truth was there had been no need. All of a sudden, my mind flooded with memories of my time with Chouko.

Chouko gave me quizzical look, puzzled over my lack of a response, and called my name once more. “Urara?”

How should I respond?

Kogetsu? I’m sure that was his name, but still, my heart knew him as Chouko.

I couldn’t breathe. My mouth opened and closed, but nothing came out. I had been caught off guard, hadn’t expected to meet him like this, looking as he did.

And so...

“I’m sorry!” I shouted, gave a swift curtsy, and fled the room.

It was the first time I realized how difficult running in a long dress was.

I had worn them everyday in my past life, but no one would have approved of the daughter of a nobleman running, and in this life, I had little occasion to wear a fancy gown.

So running like this was awkward, and I quickly found myself breathless. Not only that, but I couldn’t leave wearing this dress, so I had no choice but to find a place to hide. In the end, my only option was to return to the White Lily Room.

I slipped into the room and quickly locked the door behind me. Even though I was worried about wrinkling the dress, I sunk onto the sofa.

“Oh no! How did everything go so wrong?!”

I had been so enthusiastic coming here, but in the end, I was as spineless as ever.

I had finally been able to stand my ground with Shinmyou and the others, and yet, the second I had finally been able to see Chouko, I ran away. I really was pathetic.

I made such a point to say that I was going to live with no regrets, but I had ultimately failed.

“I’m so useless...”

“No, I’m the useless one, Urara.”

Hearing a voice directly behind me, my body trembled.

Chouko? But how? I had locked the door. But then I remembered. This room was connected to the Royal Lotus Room by an interior door.

That most certainly had been how Chouko had gotten in. He came after me.

I froze, unable to look back at him. But the sound of his clothes rustling drew nearer.

“I really am useless. Leaving you without a word and yet longing for you to want to get to know me,” he said, his slender fingers brushing my cheek from behind. He had removed the gloves he wore earlier, and I could feel the warmth in his fingertips. I trembled a bit in surprise at that heat.

“U-Um, Chouko...?”

“Kogetsu.”

“Pardon?”

“There is no more Chouko. Please call me Kogetsu, Urara.”

I could feel his fingertips quiver slightly against my cheek.

Was he as afraid as I was? That he might have been spirited away forever without seeing me again or getting to

tell me how he really felt—

I didn't want to feel those sad emotions again. Nor did I want to make him feel them.

I closed my mouth and took his hand, squeezing it in my own. I decided to put my feelings into words, without running away, so there could be no misunderstanding.

"Let's talk this all out. I want to know all about you...Kogetsu."

As I said this, Kogetsu pulled his hand away from my cheek and hugged me from behind.

"I finally caught you."

"I"

His short hair brushed the back of my neck. Unlike Chouko's smooth hair, the tips of his freshly cut locks prickled my skin a bit, though the sensation wasn't a bad one. On the contrary, it was rather pleasant.

"I want to learn all about you, too, Urara. To hear everything you have to say." Then he squeezed me tighter and whispered in my ear: "I love you."

He sat and listened to my story in silence, nodding along.

"Um...do you really believe me?"

"About your past life? Absolutely. My Urara would never lie."

"Right."

"Moreover, that level of refinement isn't something you learn in a day. There is no other explanation. Your manners, the way you could ride a horse, and the way you dance...even though we haven't danced together yet, I'm told you're rather skilled," he said, sitting next to me, his right arm around my waist while his left hand held mine.

It seemed as if he didn't want me running away.

"But there's still one thing you haven't told me. Would you now?"

"Something I haven't told you...?"

I told him about my past life as a noble and my education. Beyond that, I didn't think anything else really had any bearing on my current life, so I didn't think there was any need to bring it up.

He stared at me, furrowing his brow. "What's this I hear about you having been engaged to a prince?" he asked in a sullen tone.

Shizuku and Shinmyou! What had the two of them told him? Shizuku blurted out the story about the prince just to get at Shinmyou, and Shinmyou in turn was apparently the one who told Kogetsu, perhaps to get a rise out of him.

"That's not what happened! It was never a formal proposal, just a hint of interest from the second prince..."

"Oh, so he was interested, then?"

"Well..."

I had seen this once before, when he had been Chouko, but now he was undeniably upset.

"It's just...he was younger. This happened when he was thirteen."

"I was eleven when I fell in love with you at first sight, Urara. Age had nothing to do with it."

That was the real reason he got as upset as he did.

Wait? Eleven? What did he mean?

I had heard lots of stories of Kogetsu and the Tsukuyomi family from Shinmyou and the others. And there were so many other things I thought it might be better to ask them. But I couldn't risk muddying the waters and not being up front with him here and now.

"I'm Urara Tendou now. And the only one I want by my side is you, Kogetsu," I said seriously, but the mood began to soften. I was a bit embarrassed, but it was the truth. His arm around my waist tightened.

"Right. Well, I don't want to ever risk missing my chance again."

"Chance?"

I forgot to blink, my eyes were so fixated on him. My heart throbbed.

I held my breath. If he told me he loved me one more time, I knew I could say it back. But—

“I promise to love you for the rest of my life. Please be my bride.”

Wh-Wh-Why was he proposing to me all of a sudden?!

(((

“THAT’S it. That’s what they say in *Moonlight Beauty ~Be My Bride~* when you’ve reached the climax of a love interest’s route. It’s even in the title. That’s how the game ends. With the player getting a proposal.”

“Why would he say that to me, then?!”

“And also, every character has a lovely CG, but there was never one for Tsukuyomi,” Shizuku said with a laugh as she rode along on Roselila. “Maybe he was a secret route saved for the fandisc or DLC.”

I was sitting on Galileo’s back. The two of us were out for a leisurely horseback ride and chatting about the otome game’s events in secret.

After that proposal, I was so confused, I couldn’t answer him. Just then, everyone else came to the White Lily Room at the same time, and we were dragged back to the banquet hall to mingle.

I had been relieved to have a chance to think, but being introduced as Kogetsu’s girlfriend immediately after he returned from study abroad thrust me into the spotlight. Many people wondered how Kogetsu could have met and become entangled with a commoner like me while abroad. He told them we met through Chouko and had been pen pals ever since. What an apt response.

Honestly, it wasn’t surprising that, as a commoner present among so many upper-crust families, I would be

subject to their curiosity and jealousy.

Still, perhaps it was a shortcoming of mine, but I did so want them to like me. At least in a time like this, my upbringing as a noble helped me get by.

(((

“SO? What did you say to his proposal?”

We were on our way back to the clubroom after returning Galileo and Roselila to the stables when the topic reemerged.

“Well, about that...”

“What? You’ve proposed to her every day since then? Kogetsu, you can’t take a hint.”

We could hear Mikazuki’s laughter the second the clubroom door opened. It seemed the same thing was on the boys’ minds.

“Give it a rest, Ui. Urara’s just timid. So shut up about it.”

Kogetsu’s answer came easily. That wasn’t what bothered me. I wished they would take this conversation elsewhere.

“Ohh,” Shizuku said with a knowing grin. This was incredibly embarrassing.

Ever since the new semester began, Mikazuki had taken over as club president of the equestrian club. He had also revised the club rules. Thanks to that, some of the old members departed, and Shizuku and I were able to officially join. Naturally, Kogetsu and Shimozuru also joined.

That was why Kogetsu, Mikazuki, and Shimozuru being in the clubroom itself wasn’t a problem. It was just...

“You’re the one who needs to give it a rest. And is that how you thank me for taking your place in the wedding ceremony? Huh?” Mikazuki pressed.

"You had it easier than I did. I had to dance in front of everyone dressed like a woman during the Return to the Moon Ceremony," Shinmyou shot back. "So be quiet, Ui."

"I had to do the Parting Ceremony, so don't talk to me about it."

"Shut up! I had it worst of all, having to dance with you filthy worms in platform shoes!"

For some reason, Mochizuki and the others who weren't club members had also joined in.

Though it wasn't as if I couldn't understand their complaints.

As it turned out, Shinmyou and the others had all taken Chouko's place at different points in the ceremony. They told me they did that to give Kogetsu the time he needed to shed the Chouko likeness and reemerge as Kogetsu.

"She's supposed to be studying abroad for five years. Like hell I was gonna go!" Kogetsu muttered, and I trembled at his words.

I had missed him so much over just two weeks, the thought of five years made my heart ache.

That was why I was so grateful to the others. Because of their efforts, he was right here by my side.

"How long are you guys gonna go on like that for? You should learn from Oboro!"

"It's only natural for us to help our friend, though, right?"

Instead of taking part in his friends' quarrel, Shimozuru had appeared naturally next to Shizuku, accompanying her like a gentleman. He was so quick.

The next second, Kogetsu was at my side as well. I was quite surprised.

"That's because Oboro had it the easiest. He was Chouko for the Proposal Ceremony."

"Saku, I don't wanna hear it from you. You couldn't decide what to do until the last second," Shimozuru said,

causing a wry grin to break out on Shinmyou's face as he glanced over at me and shrugged.

In the end, he came to like me a bit better, and even though the bad blood between him and Kogetsu hadn't completely dissipated, I still had to wonder what led to his change of heart. Kogetsu glanced at me with a complex look on his face.

"Don't worry about it," he whispered.

In that case, it was best to listen to him and let it go. To lighten the mood, I went to prepare tea for everyone.

"Yaaay! Urara, I want tons of milk in mine!"

"I'll have Darjeeling."

Kogetsu's mood soured further as everyone shouted their requests.

"You guys shouldn't bother Urara lik—"

"Kogetsu," I cut him off, and everyone immediately looked at me.

I knew it wasn't very good manners to interrupt someone while they were speaking, but I wanted to try it at least once. It garnered me a lot more attention than I anticipated, so I tried to deflect with a cough.

"Could you please help me?" I asked with an innocent smile.

"Of course."

As he made his way into the kitchenette, I could hear the others behind him.

"No way."

"She's got him whipped."

Was it really that big of a deal?

(((

ON our way back from the clubroom, Kogetsu and I strolled along the twilight path. The banality of it all, how normal it felt,

made me happy. As did the feeling of Kogetsu's warmth, his hand in mine.

I had always wanted a carefree life, and yet I ended up embroiled in a rather absurd situation and fell in love with someone whose status far exceeded my own, creating a commoner life that was light years away from anything I ever anticipated. The path that lay ahead might be fraught with challenges. But I won't run away.

After all, I have a family that cares for me, friends I can count on, and someone I love from the bottom of my heart. They are all my most precious treasures. I won't let them go, no matter what.

"What are you thinking?"

"How blissfully happy I am right now."

"Me too. So why don't we make ourselves even happier?"

As he said that, Kogetsu stood in front of me and took my hands in his.

"Urara, will you marry me?"

This was today's proposal.

I gazed into Kogetsu's face, so full of hope, and gave the same response I always did.

"No. Not yet."

I felt we still had so much left to do. I wanted him to wait, just a little longer, for me.

"Well, I suppose that's that, then." Kogetsu smiled back at me, adding, "I'll simply have to ask you again tomorrow."

He was so tenacious, but I couldn't say yes so easily.

Besides, I had much more of a backbone than I had when Shizuku and Chouko pulled me into their competition.

I had grown considerably since then.

And so that was how this former count's daughter found herself forced into the plot of an otome game. Though I would say the result was a happy ending for all of us.

After Story: The Lady Becomes a Bride

I stood waiting in my wedding dress inside the manor that had been built on the estate that housed the Tsukuyomi family rose garden. It was a beautiful June day and the garden was in full bloom, lovely rose petals everywhere and the air sweet with a flowery fragrance.

I had chosen a pure-white wedding dress with a full skirt and layers upon layers of lace. The lace was adorned with a rose pattern, and the dress had classic long sleeves. After all, I wanted to look my most beautiful for this day.

I gazed out over the scene outside from the room where I waited in my wedding dress. Sunlight danced in through the roses, illuminating the room.

I couldn't take my eyes off it all. This was the setting that foretold my happily ever after.

"So beautiful..." Kirara whispered, spellbound.

"It really is. I'm so glad everything turned out so well," I replied.

"That's not what I meant! You're what's beautiful! Really, really beautiful!"

Her insistence caught me off guard, but I was grateful for the compliment nonetheless.

Certainly, it wasn't too selfish wanting to be beautiful on the day that the one I loved and I would pledge our lives to one another.

"Thank you, Kirara. Those are truly the kindest words of praise," I said, genuinely grateful.

"That's not praise. That's fact."

"Shizuku. Oh, you're both making me blush. Stop it."

"Right?" the two of them said, giggling in unison as their eyes met.

Both wore matching chartreuse dresses and looked lovely as well, but I wasn't supposed to tell them that today.

"We're your bridesmaids, Urara. Words like *lovely* and *beautiful* are meant just for you!"

"That's right!"

"I even warned Oboro. If I hadn't, he would just keep going on and on."

She started boasting about her own romance again. But I would have expected nothing else from Shizuku.

"But, well, it doesn't matter what we think. It matters what he thinks, right, Urara?" she said, pointing to the door. I turned to see Kogetsu, who wasn't supposed to be there, standing with Shimozuru.

Kogetsu stood tall in his navy-blue frock coat with a white rose boutonniere on his collar, looking intense with his hair slicked back.

Seeing him looking so handsome, I couldn't help but blush.

"Oh, Mr. Groomsman, the groom has come to steal the bride away! Stop him!"

"I tried to. I couldn't. You know there's only one person on this planet who ever could," Shimozuru said, putting his palms up to show he surrendered. He wore a light-gray vest and pants.

Kogetsu was as willful as ever with his friends.

You shouldn't give him so much trouble. I gave him a warning glance, but he merely gazed back at me with a grin.

I wondered if perhaps there was something on my face when, suddenly, he rushed over to me, his eyes sparkling.

"Urara."

"Yes?"

"My Urara."

"...Yes, I am."

Today, I would become his, in name and form.

And he would become my Kogetsu as well.

The thought brought a smile to my face. Kogetsu took my hand and dropped down on one knee.

"Urara, please. Marry me," he said, offering one final proposal and kissing the back of my hand.

It had been seven years since that first proposal, and every day since, Kogetsu had repeated the same words to me. Two years ago, I finally accepted, and since then, we've been preparing for our wedding day. Yet, he still continued to propose, even over the phone on days we weren't together.

And so, I responded honestly.

"Of course. From the very first time you asked, I planned to accept all along."

Hearing my words, everyone else in the room froze.

"...Huh?"

Oh dear. Why had everyone gone so quiet?

"Urara, did you just...?" Shizuku started, finally coming to her senses. But she was interrupted by the opening of the door and someone shouting.

"Hey! What are you doing playing around in here and sticking me with all the hard work?!" Mochizuki shouted, lugging something heavy while wearing the same light-gray vest as Shimozuru's that had been chosen for the groomsmen.

"I'm not playing around. I'm checking in on the bride like a good groomsman should."

"That's right, we're all attending to the bride. Well, technically only we girls are actually supposed to be here."

Shimozuru and Shizuku responded in sync.

It sounded as though there was still much left to do.

"Just come on and help me," Mochizuki said, grabbing Shimozuru by the ear and dragged him out of the room.

"We'd better go make sure they're all right. Urara, will you be okay here?"

I nodded, and Shizuku and Kirara followed the other two.

Kogetsu and I were left in the room together.

“Um, Kogetsu?”

“What is it, Urara?”

“Well...what are you doing?”

The second the others were gone, he had grabbed me from behind, squeezing me tight and burying his face in my neck.



"That's terribly embarrassing... Could you please let go?"

"I can't. You were mean to me, so I have to get my revenge."

Mean to him? When had I been mean to him? As I sat there wondering, I heard the sound of his lips kissing the back of my neck.

W-Was that a kiss?!

"Kogetsu!"

"If you were going to accept my proposals from the start, why didn't you say so?"

Another kiss. Ooh, this was so embarrassing.

"Then we could have gotten married much sooner."

He kissed me once more. Was he upset? No...this was his way of being affectionate and trying to get me to be affectionate in return.

He was the one who had started all of this, though.

I knew from experience that it was best to let him do as he wanted until he calmed down, but unfortunately, I couldn't today. We didn't have the time.

I took his arm and spun myself around to face him. He looked surprised.

"Was it a pain, proposing to me everyday?" I asked. His eyes widened, though not as much as earlier.

"I have been very happy," I continued. "To be fair, I was surprised at first, but then my heart pounded, thinking about how wonderful it would be to marry you. Because of the way you proposed to me each day, I could see myself as your wife. Thank you."

Kogetsu took a breath, looking a little troubled.

"I give up. I truly can't win against you."

"Kogetsu..."

It had been embarrassing to discuss openly, so we hadn't up until now, but I had to express my gratitude.

"No, it was fun for me, too. What words would I use to propose this time? Would today be the day you said yes?"

Thinking about it every day sent my heart aflutter.”

“You too?”

“Yes, that’s right. Now that you’re about to become my bride, that proposal a few moments ago was the last one.”

“Right.”

“Which just means I’ll have to find ways to say ‘I love you’ each day instead. ...And I want you to tell me you love me, too.”

My pulse quickened at his whispered words. Naturally, my answer was an easy one.

“Yes. I love you, Kogetsu.”

“I love you, Urara.”

We reiterated our adoration for one another, gazing into each other’s eyes.

Kogetsu reached for my cheek. And just then—

“Um, sorry to interrupt, but could you two save it for the altar?”

Shimozuru had been lightly knocking on the door, looking a bit shocked. Behind him, Shizuku was nodding, trying to hide her grin.

Ah, it was finally time. I gazed up at Kogetsu and realized a broad smile had stretched across his whole face.

It was time to go.

To promise our entire lives to one another.

To vow eternal love beneath that white rose arch.

Side Story: The Lady and the School Festival

“I guess raising my affection stats really is hard without triggering an event.”

I think I was supposed to say yes to that, but I didn't really feel much like answering.

“Don't you think so, Urara Tendou?!”

“...Yes.”

My answer lacked any of her brand of enthusiasm, but I was going to need all my energy to refuse whatever was coming next. Aritomo turned to the front of the classroom, balled up her fist, and pumped it into the air.

“All right! Tendou and I will be waitresses.”

Wait, how's that again?!

Our class had chosen to do a retro-style café for the upcoming school festival. We would use teahouses from the Taisho and Showa periods as inspiration. The girls would be waitresses, wearing kimonos and full aprons, while the boys would wear collarless shirts with black aprons to ensure the customers' needs.

However, St. Delia's was a school for the well-to-do, which meant many students, especially girls, resisted the idea of waiting tables.

I hated standing out myself and would have preferred working in the kitchen, but Aritomo had pushed me into being a waitress.

“Is there supposed to be some sort of...event at the school festival?” I asked in a voice low enough that no one else would hear.

“No. The game’s school festival always had you meet with one of the boys at random and have them compliment you, but you barely got any stat increases. There weren’t even any CGs during it.”

“Well then, why put any extra effort into trying to stand out at all?”

The faint light of hope flickered before me.

“I need any stat increases I can get! And what’s the point if you don’t stand out?”

No, really, I don’t think we need to stand out.

“Thank you both. No one’s volunteering, so we appreciate it,” our class representative said from the front of the room. Now I definitely couldn’t back out.

A few seats away, I could hear a voice that lacked any hint of affection.

“Ooh, leave it to the newcomers. I could never debase myself by waiting tables like that,” our classmate Aoyama said. To Aritomo, this was essentially a declaration of war.

“Oh? It’s not like I’ve ever done it before, either. But I’ll make an exception for the school festival. You all should be offering to pitch in just the same.”

That was a pretty good response. Throughout the room, I could hear murmurs of agreement.

“Okay, I’ll be a waiter, too. It’s our school festival, after all. We should enjoy it.”

After Shimozuru volunteered himself with a smile, others began to take up their parts as well. Aoyama even offered to help make the black tea. Everyone in Shimozuru’s group had so much influence.

I had hoped to be the one brewing the tea in the back, though, so I was a little disappointed.

(((

“WELCOME.”

We had attached an antique doorbell to our classroom door. Each time a new customer entered, the bell let us know.

St. Delia's middle and high school festivals were the first Saturday in June, but the first day was only for students from all divisions, their families, and special guests to attend. Perhaps because of that, it was rather lively, though not as much as it would be the day we opened to the public.

"Wow, you all really nailed the setting."

"That's because we managed to get that sweet antique doorbell."

"The menu is more important than the decor at a café. Waiter, bring me a menu."

With so many people flooding into our classroom, it was creating quite a commotion.

"You guys are so loud. Can you all please quiet down when you're here?"

Shimozuru was the waiter Mochizuki had summoned for his all-important menu. He brought it, along with some complaints.

"We're not making all that noise. All right, Oboro, what do you recommend?"

"Our light fare was imported from La Riche, so no matter what you pick, you can't go wrong."

Mochizuki was right—it wasn't they who were being loud. It was the gaggle of girls who had followed them in. Because I didn't want to draw attention to myself, I stayed away from them, hiding instead in the space marked out as our kitchen. Aritomo, however, came and grabbed me by the arm.

"Welcome!"

She dragged me back out to help her wait on Mochizuki and his friends.

"Oh, how cute. Whose idea was this?"

"It's like a fantasy version of the Taisho and Showa periods. Those uniforms suit you."

Aritomo seemed to be eating up all the compliments, but I felt embarrassed. I wasn't used to the braid or to walking around in my kimono, so I hid behind my tray and gave a shy greeting.

"W-Welcome."

Just then, I heard a loud clatter at one of the tables. I turned back to see Lady Chouko, her eyes wide, standing up partway.

"Urara...y-you're so cute."

"Thank you so much, Chouko. But this is a little embarrassing."

I was so happy she complimented me, but it made me feel a little nervous, so I tugged anxiously on the string of my apron, instead accidentally pulling loose the cord holding my kimono closed. Before I realized what was going on, Lady Chouko was out of her seat, leaping behind me and quickly retying it.

"Thank you very much."

"It's no trouble, my cute little waitress. Now then, would you please take my order?"

"Of course," I said, but from over my shoulder, someone called to us from the kitchen.

"Tendou, Aritomo, isn't it time for the two of you to go do some advertising for us? Please see that you do," Aoyama said, glancing at the clock.

"Sorry, Lady Chouko. We have to go, so I'm afraid someone else will have to take your order."

I dragged Aritomo along. We were supposed to go out to other areas of the festival for an hour and hand out flyers for our booth to spread the word. But Aritomo was intent on staying with her love interests. I kept repeating over and over, "You said you would give the festival your all," and she finally, reluctantly, agreed.

"Hey, these are heavy! Why do we have so many?!"

"There certainly are a lot. Why are there so many?"

When we voiced our objections to Aoyama, she merely snorted at us.

"That's just the way it is. This is a new experience for everyone. But surely the two of you can handle something so menial. Please and thank you."

It was clear that the last several people given this task hadn't been doing their jobs, so we were being saddled with all their leftover work. Aritomo seemed so angry that she was about to explode.

If I didn't get her under control, the number of flyers would be the least of our troubles.

"Uh—"

"My, you sure have your hands full. Let me help, too, Urara."

I had been interrupted again, but coming from this person, it was worth it.

"Chouko, what are you doing back here?"

"Don't worry about that. Let me help you. Give me some of those flyers."

She took the stack from Aritomo, lifting them with ease. How could she carry them as if they were nothing like that?

"Let's be off. We have to hand them out so you can hurry up and come back."

Lady Chouko gave Aoyama a hard stare. Aoyama looked like someone who had just found a fly in their soup. Lady Chouko then started off with the two of us in tow.

"I expect no less from you, Chouko Tsukuyomi. Just like that, you shut that snob right up."

"Snob? You mean Aoyama? Isn't it a little rude to call her that?"

"Nah, not for her. Honestly, I think they saved all these flyers for us on purpose. It was stupid for them to print so many in the first place. They make me so mad."

People were staring at us in our classic teahouse costumes. Even when we didn't approach them, they would

come to us for flyers. Because of that, we were quickly able to meet our quota.

“Since we actually have Chouko with us, let’s keep going.”

“You’re right, but we still have over half a stack left. What do we do?”

She was right; there were still so many to go. I was trying to come up with a solution when Lady Chouko spotted someone who was apparently an acquaintance and broke away to speak to them.

As we stood in the courtyard, watching the flurry of activity, I continued to think, but then Aritomo got a mischievous look in her eye.

“I found something interesting!”

...I had a bad feeling about this.

(((

“WHAT exactly is this?”

Even Lady Chouko, who rarely showed her emotions outright, pulled back in shock. I couldn’t blame her.

Aritomo had brought us in front of a group of muscular guys all wearing white blouses, tight indigo trousers, and cloth shoes with rubber soles.

“Hehehe. Check this out!” she said, pointing at a large open carriage-style vehicle with a place for riders to sit that was pulled by another person. Apparently it was referred to as a rickshaw.

“We can ride in this and hand out flyers that way. It’s genius! Who’s in charge of this?”

“Yo! The rugby team’s handling it!” one of the huge guys from the team boomed. “I’ll take you around for free since I hit you with that ball a while back.”

I remembered that first day back in April, when Aritomo had been hit with the rugby ball. She had them keep her in the hospital, but it really hadn't been anything serious.

"He's offering to do it for you, Aritomo, so go ahead and take him up on it!"

"Look, if we're going to be using their services, at least having someone like Chouko Tsukuyomi riding around with us could also help them out. You know, kinda like an endorsement? Now come on, Urara Tendou."

We made our way toward the two waiting vehicles. As Aritomo tried to help me aboard the single-rider one, a hand reached out and grabbed my arm.

"No, Urara. You ride with me."

Lady Chouko fixed Aritomo with a hard look. She was the one helping us, after all, so it really wasn't appropriate to argue with her. I nodded and took off my apron, then got in where normally a servant would be instead.

Aritomo, seated in the single-occupant vehicle, had put cat ears on her head at some point. She triumphantly exclaimed, "Let's go!"

"She certainly is a lively girl."

"She is. Looking at her is enough to energize me."

Even if she did have a habit of dragging me into things.

The rickshaw gave a heavy lurch. I grabbed Lady Chouko's arm without realizing it.

"Are you all right?" she asked, that lovely face of hers so close to mine.

"Yes, but this is a pretty bumpy ride. I thought it would be more like a horse-drawn carriage."

"There are only two wheels, so unfortunately, it's to be expected. You've ridden in a carriage before?"

I hadn't been thinking about the fact that that was in my past life, not this one.

"In my past...sightseeing trips I have..."

"I see. Well, why don't you come a little closer so the swaying isn't so bad. Closer."

She pulled me to her, so there was no space between us.

"Isn't it a little tight in here?"

"Not at all. You can get closer."

There was no way I could. And just as I was wondering how she intended for us to get any closer, a voice called out to stop us.

"What are you doing? I've been trying to find you. That's an interesting ride you've got there."

"Oh, Mitsuru. If you'd like a ride, go ask another member of the rugby team. It's quite fun." Lady Chouko greeted Mochizuki, Mikazuki, and Izayoi with a lovely smile as they eyed the rickshaw with great interest.

Their fervor elicited excitement from others in the crowd as well, many of them checking their maps to find where the rugby team was located. The team member pulling us looked pleased as well, giving us a thumbs-up.

Seeing everyone else having so much fun made me happy.

"Isn't this fun, Chouko?" I said without even meaning to.

"Yes, it is, Urara," she nodded with a broad smile, taking my hand in hers. "This is the most fun I've ever had during a school festival."

Lady Chouko really must have felt lonely with so few friends.

"There's still more festival tomorrow. Let's do something fun together."

Her smile grew even wider.

"You mean we can walk around together tomorrow, too?"

"Of course. And since we won't have the flyers, it'll be much easier," I said with a giggle.

“SAKU was so mad at me,” Chouko said later with a giggle.

That wasn’t surprising. Because of Shinmyou’s work with the student council, he hadn’t been able to walk around the festival with the others.

More concerning was what had happened with Aritomo.

Once we finished distributing flyers, we returned our rickshaw to the rugby club’s drop-off point.

“I went a little overboard and left school property in the rickshaw,” she admitted when we got there.

That was against the rules. So of course she would get in trouble.

“The school might even stop letting students use the rickshaws because of you,” I admonished after I heard the whole story.

“I know that,” she said with a pout. “They said if I come to the discipline office tomorrow and write an essay about why what I did was wrong, they won’t involve the rugby team. So don’t give me another earful!”

That was a shame. The rugby team had gone too far as well, but it seemed Aritomo taking the blame was the best course of action.

“Well, Aritomo, I guess that means you won’t be on duty tomorrow, then. We’ll have to let the others know.”

“I already told Oboro. And I told him you’d be helping me with my essay, since I can’t do it on my own.”

“Why did you tell him that?!”

“Because I’d be totally bored on my own! And with someone who’s a better writer than I am, it’ll only take half a day! Please, partner—!”

Ugh. It was partially my fault, since I’d given her most of the flyers. And that glare from Lady Chouko wasn’t helping. I made a promise. I know.

You two. Please let me split my day in half so I don’t have to break my promises to either of you...

Side Story: The Secrets of the Lacrofine Royal Family

I descended the stone steps into the palace basement. There wasn't even one window to allow natural light in. It was isolated in the truest sense of the word.

A solitary candle had been set out, but the light was far too dim to illuminate the path before me. Fortunately, I was already used to traversing this path and made confident strides toward my destination, the innermost cell in the dungeon. Before that ominous door stood two guards, to whom I presented the royal seal, as per usual. It was an inconvenience, but as visitors were restricted, it was a necessary evil.

The only two people allowed admittance to that room were the crown prince of Lacrofine, who was the elder brother of the room's occupant, and myself, the twelfth royal secretary, Louter Esdral.

"Please forgive the intrusion," I said with a deep bow before making my way to the writing desk as usual. I set out my tools. Opening the record book, I began the day's questions.

"Is there no change in your condition?"

"No."

"Is there anything you require?"

"No."

He gave me the usual monosyllabic answers, but I faithfully recorded them all the same. This was the job the crown prince had set out for me three and a half years earlier.

(((

THAT day was the first time I entered the depths of this dungeon and found the second prince seated there. When he spoke, it was in a quiet voice.

I took up my pen and listened closely, recording each word of their conversation verbatim.

"I have lost my mind, Brother."

"Do not speak such lies. You have not. Everyone knows that."

"No, I have. If I hadn't, how else could I have done what I did to that innocent girl?"

When juxtaposed with his brother's rage, the younger second prince seemed the more mature of the two.

"You mean the daughter of Duke Drayne? You needn't concern yourself with that. You might have left a few marks, but there was no danger to her life."

"But now she can no longer be queen. She's forced to spend the remainder of her days like that. What is left for her? To be sent off to the convent? I truly have done a horrid thing to her."

The way he spoke about the gravity of his actions was the first real glimpse I got of the second prince's true self.

One week prior to his imprisonment, at a ball hosted by the royal family, the second prince had poured a strange and powerful substance on the duke's daughter, one of the candidates to become the crown prince's bride. The substance burned her skin.

But the way the second prince reacted told me that the rumors, which posited everything from his having an illicit affair with the girl to her provoking him into it, were likely very wrong. There appeared to be a deeper reason behind all of this.

(((

“YOU found some proof...didn't you?

“What do you mean, Brother?”

“Regarding the daughter of Count Ortegamo, Annero—”

“Do not say that name in my presence!”

His words hadn't been for me, and yet I felt their weight all the same.

Annerosa Ortegamo. The count's daughter. I had heard rumors of the beautiful young woman. She had succumbed to what was believed to have been a sudden-onset illness half a year before the incident with the duke's daughter. But...was her death somehow connected? The thought crossed my mind, but I decided to keep it to myself and concentrate.

“I am the only one who may speak her name, Brother. You have no right to it.”

When the second prince spoke of her, the coldness and rage subsided from his face, replaced by an odd mix of happiness, sympathy, and affection.

He took a deep breath and calmed himself before turning once more to face the crown prince.

“I committed such an atrocity in front of so many. No matter what anyone says, my life can never again be the way it once was. I lost all hope of salvation on that day.”

After hearing those words, the crown prince left his brother to his confinement, returning to the surface once more.

Hence why, from that day forth, the crown prince ordered me to make a daily record of his brother's condition. And though the second prince insisted on his own waning sanity, I saw no sign of it. He was at least ten years younger than I, and yet he was far wiser in so many matters.

Little by little, I came to know the second prince over that time, and after half a year, I could confirm he was not insane. Just around the same time, a public incident occurred.

(((

“WHAT? The duke’s daughter?”

“It appears to have something to do with the death of Count Ortegamo’s daughter. As the duke’s carriage approached the main road on the way to the convent, the daughter apparently leaped out and screamed something to that affect...begging the second prince for forgiveness. Apparently it caused a tremendous commotion in town...”

Before making my way into the dungeon for the day, I had heard the news from one of my colleagues and so hastened to inform the crown prince. The moment I did, we rushed down into the dungeon. The damp air on the stone steps leading into the dungeon was mixed with the metallic scent of blood.

Oh no.

The crown prince, who had never been convinced his brother should be locked away, had ordered that his room be locked only at night. We quickly made our way to his room, where we found one guard splayed out in front of the door, his body convulsing.

“What of the second prince?!” I shouted. The weakened guard pointed into the cell.

The prince’s hands were scarlet, and his clothes were covered in blood.

“Are you hurt? What happened to your hands?!”

The crown prince rushed to his side in a panic. The second prince merely shook his head slowly, throwing the clump he clutched in his right hand aside.

“He dared to speak the name of my beloved Annerosa. So I decided to ensure he would never again make the same mistake.”

Collapsed against the wall lay the other guard, blood streaming down his face.



CALMING the uninjured guard and hearing his side of the story took until late into the night. The guard who had been attacked would often gossip about the rumors circulating around town. Today was no different. He had been discussing what had happened with the duke's daughter when, suddenly, the second prince charged out of his room and punched him.

He could scarcely remember what he had said, let alone that he had mentioned that girl's name, but I recorded the details and turned them over to the crown prince just the same.

And so, even though it was the middle of the night, the crown prince read over my report and made his way into the dungeon.

The night guards, who were noticeably less talkative than their daytime counterparts, saw the crown prince's face and quickly granted him entry.

We opened the door and found the second prince sitting on his bed. He turned to face us.

"I have lost my mind, Brother," he said softly.

The crown prince nodded, then turned to me and ordered me to record.

"Is there anything you have to say for yourself?"

"I have but one request."

"Say it," the crown prince urged.

"I would like to leave this world in exactly the same manner as Annerosa did, the day I turn seventeen, exactly the same age she was when she died," the second prince conveyed with slow but steady words.

Even as I dutifully inscribed his words, I could not genuinely grasp what the second prince was trying to say. Exactly the same manner as she? I tilted my head and

watched the crown prince. Wrinkles formed on his forehead, and he looked as if he might cry.

"I suppose there is no other way," he replied, "if it is the only way for you to truly be happy..."

"Happy... Ah, yes, perhaps this is it. My happiness lies with Annerosa. So that is all I require."

For as long as I live, I shall never forget the look on His Highness's face as he spoke, that even, gentle smile.

After that, the second prince cocooned himself in the shallow shell of his vacant happiness. No matter what I asked him, he would merely answer ambiguously. His eyes gazed far off into the distance as he watched the days slip away.

(((

"THE crown prince has sent some sweets for you," I said, pulling a small box from my breast pocket with flowers preserved in sugar inside.

"Won't you have one?" I asked, holding one out for His Highness. He innocently reached out and plucked it from my hand.

"Ah," he said, the way lovers did when feeding one another.

I watched over him, then finally made my way to the heavy door. Opening it, I gazed back at him one last time.

For the first time in ages, those eyes were at peace, vacantly reflecting the world around them.

No, he truly had not lost his mind.

He had simply been waiting for this day. When he would be the exact same age as she.

I bowed deeply to the young man I had come to know over three years and gently closed the door behind me.

Ascending the stone steps, I remembered those words he had said three years ago. On that day, his eyes had

looked the same as they had today.

“If I am ever reborn, I pray Annerosa and I will be born the same age. If it is to be so, I will choose her, and only her.”

That was the first time the prince’s face truly seemed to match his age.

And so, if the smiling prince, who patiently bided his time until he had reached that same age, were truly crazy, then so, too, must I be, for tears began to form in my eyes.

I prayed that his last wish reached the heavens. The tears continued to flow as I made my way up the steps to give the crown prince my final report.

Afterword

HELLO, I'm Sorahoshi.

Thank you very much for reading *Past Life Countess, Present Life Otome Game NPC?!*

In writing this story, I asked myself what would happen if the daughter of a count from another world were reborn in modern times. What if she were in an otome game? Would she be able to cheat? These questions drove me to write this novel.

I had originally intended this story to be half as long, but first Urara and then Shizuku and Kogetsu, and even the love interests, took on a life of their own; they all but demanded to be written, so I of course obliged.

Even though Urara was originally forced into playing the otome game, she and Shizuku became friends.

I had never planned the date in the rose garden, either, but in the process of writing, Chouko was whisking Urara away and things were going so well, even I was surprised. But because of that, the rose garden became important to the two of them. It felt strange at the time, but I think it must have been fate! These characters wrote their own events, and in some small part, I merely put their journey onto paper.

Just as I think it's fate that this book found its way to you.

This may be the end of this tale, but my hope is that life leads you to many more fantastic stories.

I hope we meet again, somewhere, someday.

Sorahoshi



cross infinite world



THE WEREWOLF COUNT AND THE TRICKSTER TAILOR

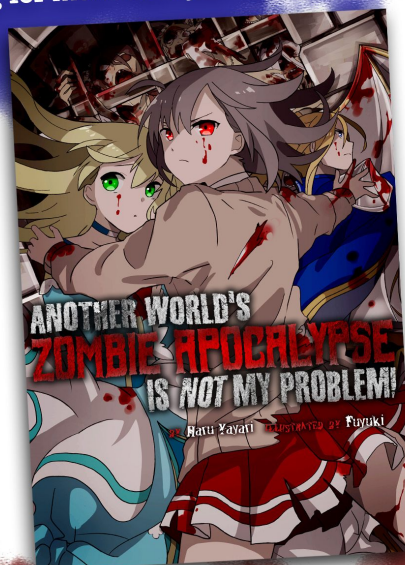
STORY BY: YURUKA MORISAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY: TSUKITO
VOL. 1 / OUT NOW

"I don't care if you are a man, let me court you."
Rock's whole life is shaken when a werewolf shows up at her shop in the middle of the night...asking for more than just clothes!

ANOTHER WORLD'S ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE IS NOT MY PROBLEM!

STORY BY: HARU YAYARI
ILLUSTRATION BY: FUYUKI
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

Just when I thought navigating high school was bad enough, I woke up to a rotting, post-apocalyptic world!



OF DRAGONS AND FAE: IS A FAIRY TALE ENDING POSSIBLE FOR THE PRINCESS'S HAIRSTYLIST?

STORY BY: TSUKASA MIKUNI
ILLUSTRATION BY: YUKIKANA
STANDALONE / OUT NOW

After being dumped by a dragon knight, Mayna sets out to prove that fairytale endings aren't only for princesses! See how this royal hairstylist wins over the dragon kingdom one head of hair at a time!

crossinfworld.com
twitter.com/CrossInfWorld



THE ECCENTRIC MASTER AND THE FAKE LOVER!

STORY BY: ROKA SAYUKI
ILLUSTRATION BY: ITARU
VOL. 1 & 2 OUT NOW

Fly with Nichika into a magic journey in another world with witches, shapeshifters, inventors, summon spirits, princess generals, homunculus, and a quirky master-apprentice duo in The Eccentric Master and the Fake Lover!

HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO MAKE A LOVE POTION!
STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
VOL. 1 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, strait-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.



THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE | OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



cross infinite world

crossinfworld.com
twitter.com/CrossInfWorld